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CHAPTER I. LA BELLE FLORINE.

"HELLO!"

"Hello, yourself!"

The challenge was quick and imperative, the response surly and suspicious; the scene a retired spot in the wildest portion of Central Park, in New York city.

For fully ten minutes a man shabbily attired had been pacing a little side-path as if waiting for some one. It was he who had been suddenly hailed, and he started and glanced furtively at the intruder.

The latter came into view from behind a clump of bushes where he had evidently been watching him. For a minute the two confronted each other at arm's length, then the shabbily dressed man demanded, sullenly:

"Well, what do you want?"

"You, Tom Bligh!"

So unexpected was the recognition and evidently correct the name, that the man addressed sprang

THE VAILED WOMAN TURNED AS SHE HEARD THE BAFFLED KEPLER IN PURSUIT, HER HAND DESCRIBING A TAUNTING, DEFIANT MOTION.

back with a cry. Involuntarily, it seemed, with the natural instinct of the criminal or fugitive, his hand sought his pistol-pocket.

"Drop that!"

The intruder had struck down his hand with a well-directed blow, and clutching his wrist in a grasp like iron, he looked straight into Bligh's eyes.

"You don't know me, it seems," he remarked.

"No, I don't, and, what's more, I'd like to know what this means?"

"A serious matter, Tom Bligh. I have been trailing you since sunrise."

"For what purpose?"

"First, because you are a bad man, and will bear watching; next, because I have something to say to you. You understand now?"

He had drawn aside his coat, revealing the official shield of the police department. The other paled slightly and then studied his captor's face, murmuring in a half-frightened whisper:

"Kepler, the detective."

"Exactly. Hello! look yonder."

The detective pointed through the dense shrubbery. Across a sloping lawn, winding in and out the circuitous bridle-path, was the figure of a horse. Its rider was a woman deeply veiled, and clad in a neat black dress.

A triumphant smile wreathed the face of the detective, who still held his companion's arm tightly.

"You know that woman?" he asked.

"I—I— Why should I?"

"Because she is your accomplice in a deep game of fraud."

Bligh started uneasily.

"And because she is coming here to meet you."

Amazement at the seeming correctness of the detective's surmise, mingled with a choking rage in the prisoner.

"I have never seen that woman's face," continued the detective, "but I know her name."

"You do?"

"Yes; it is La Belle Florine."

Bligh betrayed his astonishment.

"She will be here in a few moments, but those few moments will be sufficient to inform you what you must do under my instruction."

"Must do?" sneered Bligh, defiantly.

"Yes, or go to jail. No heroics; I'm in dead earnest!"

"You have no charge—"

"A dozen of them for past crimes when Bruce Talbot was your accomplice."

Bligh turned ghastly pale.

"Well, well," he said, hurriedly, as if to evade further discussion of that theme, "what has *that* got to do with my innocently meeting a lady friend in the park?"

The detective laughed derisively.

"A lady friend!" he repeated, in a mocking tone; "that's good, Tom Bligh, seeing as I have spotted your game. Now listen."

"Go ahead!" sullenly.

"You, Tom Bligh, and this adventuress, La Belle Florine and Rodney Wayne are engaged in a plot against a wealthy capitalist, named Anson Drexel."

"I don't know him."

"Lie number one. You and this woman visited his palatial home on the Hudson two nights since."

"You are romancing."

"Wait and see. With some deep object in view, you stole a certain document from his possession."

"I stole it?"

"One of you three. It was a certain compromising document, a confession of crime, a family secret, a valuable paper, what you will, but it enables this woman Florine to safely blackmail Anson Drexel."

"Then it *was* valuable, eh?" cried Bligh, his eyes gleaming avariciously.

"It won't be long," retorted the detective, coolly. "That paper must be returned to me before you and I part."

"I haven't got it," cried Bligh, wildly.

"But your accomplice has, and you must get it. She is coming nearer. When she is here, get that paper, or—"

The detective's eyes spoke volumes. Tom Bligh trembled violently under the hidden threat they expressed.

"Spotted!" he groaned, audibly. "See here, I'm only a hired hand in this affair."

"It's burglary—and the old crimes I can prove against you mean a life sentence all the same."

"But, she won't give it up!"

"You must *make* her. Anson Drexel will never pay a dollar of hush-money, but for that document and a knowledge of the plot underlying it—"

"Well?"

A new eager light, the craven hope of a trapped renegade, flashed into Bligh's eyes.

"A thousand dollars and no questions asked."

"It's a bargain!" cried Bligh, now elate.

"You've spoiled the game and it's no use squirming. Get into the bush; she's coming. I'll get the paper if I can."

"What is her game?"

The detective about to secrete himself again could not repress his curiosity.

"It's a deep one."

"Deeper than blackmail?"

"We never thought of that. Florine's fine scheme will startle you. Remember, I'm not to suffer, and the money is sure?"

"I promise it."

"Then I'll tell all. This woman, Florine, and Rodney Wayne, my old pal, expected, through this paper, to get Ellis Searle, Anson Drexel's nephew, in their power, and—"

"Coward!"

Both men started! The restless champing of a horse brought to a sudden halt, mingled with the low, intense word hissed out vengefully.

Leaning from the saddle of the steed which had diverged from the bridle-path, and unawares had come upon them, was the woman seen in the distance. She was still veiled, but her gleaming eyes pierced the gauze mask like stars of fire.

Tom Bligh shrunk back with a cry of mingled surprise and fear, and the detective as he saw a white jeweled hand sweep from the folds of the dress, sprung suddenly forward.

"Hold, woman! You are known."

Her reply was a tragic one.

Two shots!

Instantly a gleaming revolver had flashed into sight; the shapely hand pressed the trigger and directed the weapon straight at the detective.

A bullet grazed his arm at his side as he shrunk back involuntarily at the woman's sudden act, then a second report, and with a scream of mortal agony Tom Bligh tottered where he stood, while the woman, daring and desperate, turning her startled steed as on a pivot dashed madly into the dense shrubbery—gone like a flash!

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS SIGNALS.

"WHICH way did she go? Quick, man!"

"Who?"

"A woman dressed in black, on horseback. She struck out by this road."

Kepler, the detective, had asked the question of a park policeman.

One glance at Tom Bligh after that second shot fired by his veiled accomplice, had told him that he was dead. Then Kepler had recovered his presence of mind, and, unheeding the slight wound he had received, had darted after the flying horsewoman.

Clattering hoofs struck the bridle-path as the detective gained the side of the mounted park policeman leisurely patrolling the road. The latter had indicated a side avenue as the direction taken by the woman.

"Your horse! Jump down quick! She is a murderess! Quick, man, I say!" and the detective showed his badge. The policeman slid from his horse and Kepler sprung to the saddle. One glance down the side avenue showed the object of his quest a hundred yards ahead, and away he dashed.

The veiled woman turned as she heard the baffled Kepler in pursuit, her hand describing a taunting, defiant motion. A groan of impatience and chagrin escaped the detective; she could not help but escape him, it seemed, for, as her hand raised the whip, her spirited steed started forward like the wind.

The patrol horse could not be forced to anything like such speed, and as the woman turned amid the intricacies of the winding roads, she was quickly and completely lost to view.

"I have lost her," murmured the baffled officer. "Ha! what is that?"

His attention had been fixed on a new object of interest, for, as he turned a curve, he came upon a horseman who sat gazing in apparent profound wonderment down the road.

In a flash the detective comprehended: the stranger was marveling at the flight of the woman, who must have passed him, and this new figure in the scene the detective instantly recognized.

"Rodney Wayne!" he murmured—"the woman's accomplice in this game. I see it all."

He reasoned that the woman, Florine, had left this man, her escort, at the spot until she had completed her interview with Tom Bligh; that interview had resulted in a *dénouement* so tragic that she had been compelled to quick flight, and, not pausing amid the vital necessity of escape, she had passed Rodney Wayne like a flash.

Perhaps she had directed a quick explanation to him as to the cause of her excited haste; at all events, the man's pose was one of profound wonder as he sat gazing perplexedly down the road and then started his horse forward.

The detective's eyes brightened.

"He does not know me," murmured Kepler. "By following him, I shall find her."

The detective went over the case in hand. The day previous he had been engaged by Anson Drexel, a wealthy capitalist, on a peculiar mission.

A valuable paper had been stolen from Drexel's safe. Later, a woman had appeared and announced that, through it, she should expect to secure a coveted price for its suppression.

The capitalist was reserved, impatient, terribly excited as he told Kepler all this, and the detective, knowing but half the details of the mysterious affair, had finally learned that three persons were engaged in some plot of which the stolen document was only an infinitesimal part.

Rodney Wayne he knew as a villain and a bold, scheming scoundrel, who had in the past directed the operations of a desperate band of criminals.

One of his hirelings was the dead Tom Bligh.

The woman, La Belle Florine, was a new element in metropolitan life. No one seemed to know her. It was rumored that she had been an actress in Paris at one time.

Satisfied that there was a deep plot underlying the possession of the paper, the detective had spotted and followed Tom Bligh with the result that has been seen.

Had that person lived to tell his fateful story, the detective would have been startled, for the scheme under manipulation, soon to branch out more perfectly, was one of the most desperate and startling of modern times.

The man the detective had recognized as the principal actor in the affair, Rodney Wayne, had crossed the park and emerged on one of the avenues; the detective, keeping at a safe distance, followed him, apparently unobserved.

The former finally stopped at a livery stable. Kepler secured his horse near by and glided into the place. A smoking steed was just being led to its stall.

"The horse the woman rode," murmured Kepler.

Wayne glanced at the steed, and seeming to comprehend that his companion of the park had arrived and departed, left the stable. The detective shadowed him closely. Wayne turned into a fashionable street thickly built up, and finally paused.

He glanced up at the window of a large apartment house. Kepler watching the direction of his glance rested his eyes on a window in the second floor.

A grim shadow crossed the detective's face. A woman had appeared at that window!

"La Belle Florine," he murmured.

Rodney Wayne seemed waiting for some signal. The woman did not beckon, however. Instead, as her eyes fell on the detective, ere he could turn or dodge aside; her hands made a significant gesture.

It seemed to convey a warning to Rodney Wayne, for he replied with an intelligent

motion and walked on, the detective gliding into a doorway near at hand.

Wayne proceeded twenty paces and carelessly disappeared up the steps of a house directly opposite the place where the woman was. The detective was puzzled and undecided. The veiled figure still stood at the window. From her pose Kepler could understand that she was looking directly at him.

His situation was a peculiar one. She had discerned him, and he knew where she was, yet he realized that she had the advantage of him. Should he dash across the street and enter the house, she would doubtlessly essay flight, and in that extensive building, with exits on another street, she could baffle pursuit.

So long as she remained in sight, Kepler was content to stay where he was, grateful for the time afforded for mature reflection as to his course.

With the reserved forces of criminal and detective in open play, some shrewd developments would be sure to ensue. Florine seemed to understand that her continued presence at the window would extend the tacit truce.

The detective saw her glance up at the house into which Wayne had disappeared, and suddenly extend her hand and draw a stand toward her.

Her fingers selected some object from it. As she lifted it into full view, the detective started. It was a common letter block, such as is used by children, and as she placed it upon the sash against the glass of the window, the curious and interested detective could not repress an emotion of admiration at her mingled shrewdness and boldness.

For he divined her purpose instantly. She intended communicating with her ally, Wayne, hidden from the detective's view, but doubtlessly in her full sight in the building opposite.

B. The letter could be plainly seen through the glass.

"Bligh," murmured Kepler. "It's plain she means him."

His suspicions seemed verified as the woman coolly selected four more blocks, and her shapely hand arranged them on the sash.

D—E—A—D. "B—dead. Bligh dead; that's plain enough," breathed the detective. "She is arranging a new action: F—F-l-i-g-h-t. Good enough, my lady, but the minute you leave that window, I follow you. Florine—Flight. A clever means of telegraphing, truly."

The steady fingers swept the blocks aside. A new letter appeared. D.

"Detective," muttered Kepler, "that means me. T-r-a-i-l-e-d, V. What does she mean? Ah, I see; You, Wayne. Well, what does she direct him?"

The ensuing word, rapidly framed, was a puzzler. It was a long one, and the woman was compelled to extend it over the double panes to represent it.

V-i-l-l-a-c-l-a-i-r-e-s. Evidently, Florine had completed her labors. She swept the blocks aside, and turned her face toward where the detective was standing. For a moment the hidden eyes seemed fixed upon her pursuer. Then she lifted her hand.

The same swift motion, derisively employed in the park, was again betokened, expressing a menace or a contemptuous disdain of his success in trailing her. Suddenly she disappeared from the window.

"I have nothing definite against Rodney Wayne," murmured the detective, starting forward and crossing the street. "This woman centers my interest for the present. She is the murderess of Bligh, and here goes!"

The entrance to the structure was at one side. Kepler was burning with impatience as he tried the door. It was locked. His violent ring at the bell almost snapped the wire.

A man came to the door. Without a word of explanation the detective dashed by him, threading the halls and the corridors of the second floor, calculating with remarkable correctness as to the location of the room whence the woman had signaled.

A door opened at his touch. The floor of the luxuriously-furnished apartment he entered was littered with the blocks used at the

window, but the apartment held no occupant but himself.

"She has escaped," he muttered, between his set teeth.

For ten minutes he ransacked the structure. As he learned that there were several exits at the rear of the house, he knew that further search was vain and he returned to the street.

A wild surprise exhibited itself on his face as he glanced up and down its length. A man had just come down the steps of the house opposite.

He started rapidly down the street, looking neither to the right nor the left. Going steadily on his way, he seemed to be hastening to keep some important engagement.

"Wayne," murmured the detective, excitedly, "and he has not seen me—does not even know me, perhaps."

Kepler took up his second trail of the hour, of the man whom he believed could lead him to the hiding-place of La Belle Florine.

"Villa-Claire's!" breathed the detective. "Is he going there, wherever that is?"

Wayne proceeded without so much as turning for over a mile, but halted at last.

It was on a narrow street near West Broadway. He turned from the pavement and entered a little shop the curtains of which were partly drawn to exclude the sunlight.

"A barber-shop!" murmured the detective. "Can this be Villa-Claire's?"

He determined on a bold move. He must not lose sight of his man. He entered the place with a furtive glance ahead of him. Rodney Wayne had taken off his overcoat, and proceeded coolly to one of the chairs in the place. The man at the other chair, a dark foreign-looking individual, glanced inquiringly at the detective.

"I'm in for it," soliloquized Kepler, "and Wayne does not suspect me."

He placed his hat on the mirror-slab, and proceeded to the vacant chair. The barber adjusted the towel around his neck, and Kepler turning his head slightly, noticed that to all appearances Wayne's mission here was simply one of the toilet. Yet an uneasy fear oppressed him as he imagined he heard the former murmur a low sentence in some foreign tongue.

The man adjusting the towel to Kepler's neck held him back it seemed with unnecessary force. At the same moment his eyes took to their dark depths a peculiar light and the detective heard him speak a single word, an interjection of some kind in the French language.

The man at Wayne's chair suddenly sprung to the door and locked it, while Wayne himself, leaping to his feet, drew down the curtain to its full length.

"Trapped!" breathed Kepler, as he strove to rise.

The rear door opened and a woman's figure crossed the threshold. The same veiled face Kepler had seen before filled the doorway. It was La Belle Florine.

"Our man!" she cried, in thrilling tones. "Whoever he is—a detective—a spy—the chair, the cellar!"

Instantly the man bending over the detective, pushed his head still further back. A grinding, metallic sound vibrated the chair. A spiked iron collar seemed to reach out from its hidden mechanism and encircled the detective's throat.

The woman sprung forward and touched an iron bar sunk in the wall as a cry of involuntary surprise escaped Kepler's lips.

With a shock the floor opened, with a crash the chair descended through space.

A thousand knives seemed cutting and tearing at the detective's throat.

The stunning fall seemed to drive him to insensibility.

He struggled to release himself. The effort only increased his sufferings.

A key grated in the lock.

Rodney Wayne, his evil face malignantly triumphant, entered the cellar.

Behind him was the man who had opened the chair, bearing a lantern.

A dark figure rushed past both.

It was La Belle Florine!

Her murderous, treacherous eyes, no longer veiled, gloated over the detective's dying misery.

"Duped! trapped!" she cried. "Ah! meddling dog of a spy, the one foe to our plots, you are done for."

The blood gurgled in his throat, his heart beat fast and wildly with the parting throes of physical dissolution.

The game was ended for him forevermore.

In the pursuit of duty he had met his death.

The man Villaclaire had opened a trap-door.

"Where does it lead to?" demanded Wayne.

"To the sewer, the river, oblivion."

The detective's eyes closed. He essayed to speak.

"You have murdered me basely," he gasped, feebly, "but my death will be avenged."

"It will never be traced!" cried the woman defiantly.

"It will!" breathed the dying officer "La Belle Florine, Rodney Wayne, colleagues of Bruce Talbot, the man against whom every detective in New York city owes a deadly score of hate, your plots will yet fail and this inhuman crime will yet call for vengeance."

He was fast dying, his utterance was unnatural and choked.

"He threatens vainly," cried the woman, passionately. "The coast is now clear."

"Not so!" gasped the dying man. "I knew your desperate character. I have warned another."

"Another?" echoed Wayne in an alarmed tone.

"Ay! my warmest friend. I wrote him but to-day. I told him of your plans, of my possible peril. When forty-eight hours have elapsed, and I do not return to him, he will immediately start on your trail."

A convulsive throe shocked the detective to the oncoming rigor of death.

"Fear not," uttered the woman, defiantly. "Even this man does not know our real plans."

"But that other will; I shall be avenged."

"By whom?"

And as the dying detective fell back, gasping for breath, his vision fading to the blackness of dissolution, his bloodless lips framed the words.

"Falcon, the Society Detective!"

CHAPTER III.

ON THE TRAIL.

FALCON!

The name spoken by the dying detective might serve to appall his inhuman murderer.

It was a name that held a mortal dread for evil-doers in the great metropolis, not only among the depraved petty criminals of the city but amid the higher walks of life. Quick as a flash to detect, swift as a falcon to pursue—this was the reputation of that remarkable man.

The guilty embezzler, the forger, the counterfeiter felt fated when they knew that the veteran detective of the force, Falcon, had taken up their trail, and the heartless blackmailer, the man who traded on family secrets and the miseries of others, abandoned his game when this skilled official was set upon his track.

To Falcon New York society owed more than it thought, entertained him oftentimes when it little suspected his presence.

Two nights after the fatal experience of Kepler, the brave young detective, a social event of no little importance occurred at the palatial home of Anson Drexel.

The extensive edifice fronting on the beautiful lawn, with its now deserted wing directly overlooking the rolling Hudson, was the scene of a fashionable reception.

The grand old drawing-rooms echoed to brilliant conversation and music. All was excitement and pleasure. It was the occasion of a reception awarded an old military friend of Anson Drexel who was about to leave for Europe, and it was at just such gatherings as these that the detective, Falcon, in tracing down mysterious criminals in high life, was wont to appear.

No role could have been better assumed and carried out by him than that suggested by a lay figure in the entertainment now taking place.

At the piano, executing difficult compositions for the edification of the guests, was a person who attracted attention only as a professional musician.

He was known to the guests as Professor

St. Cyr. He did not impose upon good breeding by exceeding his mission, but was courteous and deferential.

He seemed to seek obscurity rather than invite condescension or equality. Enwrapped in his task, he played this and that composition until the amusements of the evening drifted in some other direction, and the guests began to depart.

Idly fingering the ivory keys, he appeared abstracted, weary; yet the keen, flashing eyes behind the bushy, drooping hair, the shrewd smile half-hidden by the exaggerated pointed mustache, told of a keen watchfulness and thought centered on some object aside from the music.

If this was indeed Falcon, in some new role, no one in the apartment suspected it; and how could they, in the drawing-rooms of Anson Drexel, the wealthy and high-minded proprietor of Lawndale?

Professor St. Cyr, or Falcon himself, the man at the piano, had fixed a close attention upon two persons near him. The one was a handsome young man about twenty-five years old. This was Ellis Searle, the nephew and heir of Anson Drexel, just returned that evening from a business trip in the West.

The other was a man Searle had introduced as a friend, and to whom he seemed suddenly and mysteriously attached. He had introduced him as Mr. Lynn Watson, but every time the musician caught that name a hidden suspicious twinkle came into his eyes.

"He calls himself Lynn Watson," he muttered, finally. "Either that man is Rodney Wayne or I am not Falcon."

The words of the pretended musician betrayed the secret of his true identity so carefully concealed by disguise, and as he riveted his gaze intently on the man, he seemed to commune vividly with his own thoughts.

"What is his game?" he murmured, "if it is he, seeking to gain Ellis Searle's confidence? Kepler! have his enemies indeed killed him, or is he their prisoner? Mine the task to learn, mine the mission to release this menaced family from the toils of Rodney Wayne and his mysterious accomplice, this woman, Florine. Ha! an idea. I shall soon know."

The eyes of the detective never wandering from the face of the man calling himself Lynn Watson, he allowed his fingers to drift into a melody, soft, pathetic, but well-defined.

It was an air that had years before rung through the concert salons of Paris. It had been composed by a hopelessly-stricken lover of a new theatrical star—La Belle Florine.

Falcon smiled grimly as he saw the man called Watson suddenly terminate his earnest, low-toned conversation with Ellis Searle. He arose to his feet and, slightly pale and mystified, came to the piano.

"What was that air you were just playing?" he asked, his eyes burning fitfully.

The professor of music shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"How can I tell—a bar—a catch—a song from ze memory. Ah! I remember now—ze Belle Florine. You hear ze song before, monsieur?"

"Never; but it sounded familiar," was the reply of the pretended Lynn Watson, spoken with a sigh of relief.

"My man," came intensely from the detective's lips. "Now for operations."

In his pocket was a letter he had received the day before, which bore the signature of his young friend and *protege*, Kepler.

It told Falcon how, on a dangerous trail, risk and death might come, and, if the writer did not appear within forty-eight hours, Falcon could believe he met with some mishap.

And telling all young Kepler knew of the Drexel case, it directed him to hunt down the actors in a plot hiding a great mystery he, Kepler, had not yet fathomed.

Falcon glided from the piano and into another apartment.

As he glanced at the face of Anson Drexel, he knew that its forced smile concealed a haunting, deadly fear, and as he heard the master of Lawndale direct a servant to send his nephew to the library, the detective glided also in the direction of that apartment.

"To-night I must learn all," he murmured; "to-night I must know why Rodney Wayne has sought out Ellis Searle, what

his game is, where and who is La Belle Florine."

A curtain separated the library from the hall. Within its folds Falcon concealed himself. A minute later Anson Drexel entered the room.

All his smiling assumption of enjoyment had faded from his aged face, and he groaned audibly as he sunk to a chair and bowed his head upon his hands.

"This suspense is killing me!" the detective heard him murmur. "Ah! Ellis, at last."

His nephew had entered the apartment. The detective saw on the face of the latter an expression of mingled wonder and concern.

"You are ill, uncle?"

"No, no."

"But you sent for me—"

"Because I must see you and relieve my mind of a secret that is killing me. The guests are nearly gone. Sit down."

He fixed his sad, melancholy eyes on Ellis Searle's face, glanced weariedly at the drawing-rooms, and said:

"Since you were here last, a great misfortune has befallen me."

"You alarm me, uncle."

"A misfortune," continued the old man, brokenly, "that haunts and oppresses me day by day. In its publicity I see disgrace, dishonor, perhaps death. I must tell you all."

Ellis Searle's ingenuous face had become serious, almost pale. He waited suspensefully for his uncle's next words.

"To the world," resumed Drexel, "I am a well-to-do retired capitalist. In reality I am a beggar. A recent heavy loss in speculating has left me but a tithe of my former fortune."

Ellis Searle's face brightened.

"And that is the bugbear that haunts you!" he cried, cheerily.

"No," replied the old man gravely. "There is something else."

"What is it?"

"I will tell you. Fifteen years ago, when my fortune consisted solely of this place, and that heavily mortgaged, I joined with a friend in a mutual investment in the far South."

"Which brought you your fortune?"

"Yes," went on the old man. "One night he returned. His wife had died. He had come back with his twin children, two girls, a rich man. He came to divide our venture. In this very room," and Anson Drexel shuddered visibly, "fifteen years ago to-night."

He paused impressively.

"The secret is coming," murmured Falcon.

"He informed me that he had made nearly half a million dollars. Part of this he had left in the South for prudential reasons. We drank deeply amid our success, and then we essayed a settlement."

"What was it?"

"I had invested five thousand dollars. He claimed I should be content with fifty thousand, as he had done all the work. We quarreled slightly over it. Both were flushed with drink. He finally flung his pocket-book on the table, containing double that amount, with an imprecation on my avarice and unjustness, and then—"

"And then, uncle?"

"We had hot words. A demon seized the wine-cup! it led to blows. He struck me. I returned the blow in self-defense. To my horror it felled him to the floor insensible. In an agony of terror, he still breathing, I hastened for a physician. I could not find one. I returned half an hour later."

"And your visitor?"

"Was dead!"

CHAPTER IV.

A TRAGIC EPISODE.

ELLIS SEARLE started at the tragic statement.

"I had killed him. I felt it, I knew it. Oh! Ellis!" cried Anson Drexel in an agonized tone. "My nephew, my sole friend and confidant in this affair, be merciful! I did not mean it, he himself invited the attack. It was a blow in self-defense of one man against another, both in liquor."

"My poor uncle, how you must have suffered."

"Suffered!" came in a hollow tone from

Anson Drexel's lips. "It was slow, grinding agony. A new terror seized me as I thought of my terrible situation. If I told the truth, who would believe me? My poor friend dead in my home, struck down by my hands. What wild impulse seized me I know not but I did a mad, cruel act."

"And that was—"

"To secure the money, to seize his body ere the servants returned and secrete it."

"Where?"

"In this house. Oh, I cannot tell it all. The horrible memories that haunt my heart are searing, torturing. Days wore on, my secret appalled me, wearing me down to the verge of insanity. And then I thought of his orphan children. Heaven forgive me, I, their father's murderer!"

"Say not so, uncle, you never meditated crime."

The woe-stricken face took no hope from the nephew's words.

"I sought the children. I could never find them. They had disappeared. Then, as time wore on, I reasoned away my fears. I employed the money, his, my own, in speculating. I became rich, but his dying face haunted me, his unshrouded form mocked me, his suffering, orphaned children cried out to me from the obscurity I could not penetrate. Heaven help me!"

The detective, used as he was to tragic situations, was intensely impressed with the story he had heard.

The old man continued:

"That was fifteen years ago. Since then I have never heard of those children, have never known a moment's peace. But retribution came."

"How?"

"My fortune was swept away almost entirely, a week since, and another menace!—Ellis, be strong, forgiving, for upon my honored name the blot of shame and ignominy must fall at last."

"What mean you?" cried the young man, sharply.

"That, a week since a man and woman, bold adventurers, came hither. They must have known my secret, must have secured some trace of the fortune my friend had left in the South. They managed to secure possession of a paper that condemns me."

"Condemns you?"

"Ay! my confession of crime written for your sake, to be read after my death."

"And this confession?"

"The woman in the plot holds over my defenseless head, demanding a price for its redemption, or my arrest and disgrace."

"Monstrous!"

Ellis Searle gasped out the word wildly.

"It is true. Hemmed in by plots of evil, I sent for a detective named Kepler to follow these people. He told me they were desperate adventurers. He promised to return that paper and silence them. Two days have passed, and he has not redeemed his pledge—I am lost!"

Anson Drexel hid his pale face in his trembling hands. The concerned features of his nephew struck the watching detective with a strange pity.

"Suppose these people do tell all they know and produce the confession?" remarked Ellis Searle.

"It would show my cowardice and presumable guilt after all these years of silence. Besides—"

Anson Drexel hesitated painfully.

"Besides what?"

"I am satisfied that they know or seek some knowledge of the money my friend had hidden."

"He left no trace of it?"

"Could I search his dead body? No, no, Ellis, a deeper plot than we dream of underlies all this."

"He speaks more fatefully than he thinks," murmured Falcon.

"How do you know that?" asked young Searle of his uncle.

"Because of the claims of this adventuress."

"She demands—"

"To be taken into this house."

Ellis Searle started.

"To learn more of his secret, to carry out some shrewd plot," breathed Falcon significantly.

"Demands to come here?" repeated Searle.

"Ay, she insists upon my accepting her as

a pretended relative, of introducing her to you. Perhaps—oh, Ellis! it is terrible!—an alliance with yourself."

The young man sprung to his feet fairly white with indignation.

"Incredible!" he gasped.

"My fears have worked out a terrible retribution," returned his uncle, gloomily. "I can hope for safety only in removing the body from its hiding-place and temporizing with this woman."

"Temporizing with a base blackmailer?"

"Ay! to learn her real plots. Perhaps she knows of these children?"

"What of it?"

"My duty to my dead friend! Let her come. We will pretend to accede to her wishes."

"Never!"

"You will lead her on to develop her scheme."

"Impossible!"

"And why?"

"Because, uncle, I have myself a secret to tell you."

"A secret!"

"Yes."

"What mean you?"

"I was married to the woman of my choice a week since."

Anson Drexel started excitedly. At that moment a servant peered in from the drawing-room. He was unobserved by uncle or nephew; but the hidden detective saw him linger and listen curiously.

"You married, and without my consent?" cried Anson Drexel, with sudden pain.

"Yes; but you will learn to love my wife."

Anson Drexel, amid his excitement and irritability, uttered an angry exclamation.

"You have no right to condemn my freedom of action," cried his nephew, sharply.

"Her name?"

"Myrtle Winthrop."

Great Heavens! that was the name of the man I—

"Hold!"

The sentence spoken by Anson Drexel was silenced by his nephew's sudden imperative word.

The detective saw Ellis Searle arise to his feet, stare wildly before him and draw a revolver with the rapidity of light.

The eavesdropping servant hearing the angry words, observing the action, started and paled as he misconstrued the act into violence against his master, for just then Anson Drexel cried out, in wild amazement.

"Ellis, Ellis, would you kill me?"

To the horror of Falcon, the young man raised his revolver. Apparently aimed directly at Anson Drexel, it was fired suddenly.

A deafening report followed. With a heartrending cry, Anson Drexel sunk to the floor, uttering the words:

"Ellis, my nephew, you have killed me."

Mystified, startled, Falcon sprung into the room. He heard the servant rush from the spot, crying:

"Ellis Searle has murdered his uncle!"

He saw the nephew dart past the old man toward a door behind him, and spring through it.

The detective, at a complete loss to analyze the motives of the strange step, dashed forward to intercept him, but the door was closed abruptly in his face. He seized the knob. The door had been locked in a flash.

"What does this mystery mean?" he ejaculated excitedly.

Unable to pursue the fugitive, the detective glided to the side of the prostrate man.

The guest and servants were crowding excitedly to the scene. Upon the floor lay the master of Lawndale.

"He is injured, he has fainted," cried one of the guests.

"He has been murdered!" replied the eavesdropping servant wildly.

Falcon lifted his steely glance to the man's face.

"You are right," he said quietly—"he is dead."

"And his murderer?" demanded a voice among the throng.

The servant replied:

"His nephew, who has fled, Ellis Searle. I saw him fire the fatal shot."

Falcon had been examining the death wound of the prostrate man, and he started

as he found a bullet-hole in the back of the head.

It opened his eyes to a startling fact. For the bullet that had killed Anson Drexel had been fired from behind.

"Ellis Searle could not have fired that shot," murmured the detective. "The deafening report must have been a double one. But if Ellis Searle did not murder his uncle, who did?"

CHAPTER V.

DEEPENING PLOTS.

In the midst of a great mystery, Falcon stood gazing down perplexedly at the dead body of the murdered man.

He did not long delay, however, in inaction. Seeming to form a ready theory in his mind, he turned quickly to the servant who had witnessed the tragedy.

"Clear the room," he ordered in a sharp tone.

The man stared curiously at him.

"Who are you that gives orders?" he demanded resentingly.

"A detective. There is no time to delay, obey me."

Something in his manner impressed the servant forcibly, and a moment later the apartment was vacated except for themselves.

The guests were wondering, startled at the transformation of the supposed musician into a mysterious messenger of the law. The detective made a second rapid examination of the body. Then he proceeded to the door through which Ellis Searle had disappeared.

His eyes glowed intelligently as he found imbedded in the woodwork a bullet. It told to his quick mind the entire story. Ellis Searle was in a terrible situation. The servant had heard angry words between nephew and uncle, and had seen the former apparently fire deliberately at his relative.

This evidence would almost convict Ellis Searle; but Falcon comprehended fully what neither he nor the eavesdropping servant had seen.

Ellis Searle had undoubtedly drawn his revolver, not to kill his uncle, but to prevent that very calamity. He had, Falcon reasoned, seen some person open the door behind Anson Drexel.

This person, an accomplice in the plots against Anson Drexel, was on the point of shooting the master of Lawndale at the moment that the latter was developing a deep secret destructive to the plots of his enemies.

What could his last words referring to the name mentioned by his nephew—that of his newly-made wife—signify except that fate was about to disclose some clew to at least one of his dead friend's children?

To prevent his uncle being killed by the intruder, Ellis Searle had himself fired at the latter. The two shots had doubtlessly been simultaneous. That of the lurking assassin had killed Anson Drexel, while the one fired by the misjudged Ellis Searle had missed its intended mark, and become imbedded in the woodwork.

The young man had then sprung through the door, perhaps to be overpowered by the assassin, and the door locked.

"Where does that door lead?" demanded Falcon.

"To a corridor."

"Unlock it."

The servant took a key from his pocket and opened it. The light from the library showed a little hall with a window looking out on a ground balcony. This window was open.

"And yonder door?" inquired the detective, keenly surveying the place, and pointing to a door at its end.

"To the deserted wing."

"Open it."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"I have no key, it has not been unlocked for years."

The detective sprung through the window to the ground.

"Ellis Searle must have gone this way then," he murmured.

He examined the grounds closely, and found marks as of recent hurried footsteps over the grass.

The deserted wing was dark and forbid-

ding. No sign of life existed outside of the lighted drawing-rooms, but a short distance away near a path leading to the river, the detective saw a light flash.

It disappeared as he was about to start in that direction, and he paused abruptly, reflecting deeply.

That the appearance of Wayne and the murder of Anson Drexel were important incidents in some plot against the latter, the detective doubted not, but he was puzzled to find a reason for the crime.

In Lawndale, the schemers disposed of the most impressible subject of their plots, and if they had also murdered the nephew, or abducted him, they were certainly concealing some intricate motives.

Was it Anson Drexel's supposed fortune they were after? Who had fired the fatal shot? Why had it been fired? With only the sparse knowledge afforded by Kepler's brief letter, Falcon was deeply mystified.

"There is no time for delay," he muttered, grimly. "Ah! the pretended Lynn Watson, the real Rodney Wayne, I must watch him."

He returned and questioned the servants, and found that Wayne had disappeared. He had said he was going instantly to the village to secure the police. The detective speedily decided on his course.

That this man Wayne was the central figure in the plots against Drexel he was positive, and he determined to follow him.

Falcon reached the village an hour later. Wayne had not been near the police station, but the detective traced him to the village inn.

Here he learned Wayne had ordered a room and writing materials, and had retired for the night. Falcon located the apartment awarded the late guest.

So far, Wayne's actions and misrepresentations were evidences of his connection with the crime. He had falsified to the servants, and had shown an utter indifference regarding the tragedy and the disappearance of his supposed friend, Ellis Searle.

The detective stopped at a door on the upper floor of the tavern, and knocked sharply. There was no reply, and he turned the knob and boldly entered the apartment.

A lamp burned on a table which was littered with writing materials. The window was open and the room tenantless. On a dressing case, however, was a pair of false whiskers and a case of cosmetics.

These suggested the make-up of Lynn Watson so surely that Falcon instinctively divined that Rodney Wayne had abandoned his disguise.

He proceeded to the table and examined the papers lying there. Crumpled up on the floor were several pieces of paper. Evidently Wayne had been writing a letter.

There was nothing to indicate the name of his correspondent, but finally, by placing together several torn bits of paper, Falcon made out something important.

Parts of a rejected or re-written epistle, the fragments read:

"I have carried out my part of the scheme. Drexel is dead; Searle safely disposed of. Within twenty-four hours Florine secures the secret. Then for Ellis Searle's wife. Watch her well. As to me, I drop Lynn Watson and assume a new identity to await developments. Our scheme cannot, must not fail."

"Their scheme," murmured Falcon—"what is it? This case is a puzzler, if there ever was one."

He set out at once for Lawndale. The drawing-rooms were darkened, but in the reception apartment a little knot of servants sat discussing the tragedy in hushed whispers.

They separated and viewed Falcon with mysterious awe as he beckoned aside the servant who had witnessed the tragedy.

"Has anything occurred since I left here?" he asked.

The man fairly trembled with the apparent importance involved in his assent.

"I should say so!" he interjected.

"What?"

"We searched the grounds. The murderer, Ellis Searle—"

"How do you know he was the murderer?" demanded Falcon, sharply.

"Did I not see him fire the shot?"

"Well, well, proceed."

"At the edge of the rocks, looking down on the river, we found a piece torn from his clothing."

The detective started.
"And a cuff with his monogram button in it."

"That is important."

"We believe he fled there and fell over, or committed suicide."

The suggestion of this new development fairly silenced the detective.

"And I found," continued the man, "something else."

"What was it?"

"Ellis Searle's pocket-book."

He handed the detective a long, flat object as he spoke.

"Where?" inquired the detective.

"In the little hall I showed you."

Falcon's eyes glowed keenly. He marvelled that the pocket-book had eluded his sight when he was in the corridor.

In the attempt to fasten suicide and flight on this man, he discerned a deep plot to deceive, but he realized that he had not yet fathomed the motive.

He opened the pocket-book, the servant watching him closely. The detective glanced rapidly over its contents. There were several letters written in a beautiful feminine hand.

All these were signed Myrtle Winthrop, and this was the name of the woman Ellis Searle had recently married.

There was also a marriage-certificate evidencing that Ellis Searle and Myrtle Winthrop had been married at the town of Belleville about a week previous, and inclosed in this document was a picture.

It was indorsed on the back "My wife, Myrtle," and bore the date of the marriage-certificate. Falcon placed the pocket-book in his pocket, and advanced toward the library.

The servant was about to address him again, evidently having something further to divulge, when the detective started violently.

He had paused midway across the hall, and stood staring into the library. The curtains were drawn aside. Covered with a sheet on the floor was the body of the dead master of Lawndale.

Seated near to him was the form of a woman. She was dressed in black and deeply veiled, her attitude being one of deep grief and distress. Her figure seemed to sway wildly with sobbing emotion.

"That woman!" cried the startled detective.

"I was just going to tell you," replied the servant, eagerly. "She just came."

"Who is she?"

"That is a new mystery."

"What do you mean?"

"She came a quarter of an hour ago. She is Ellis Searle's wife."

Falcon almost staggered under the unexpected surprise of the declaration.

"His wife!" he cried, incredulously. "Ah! I see."

His burning glance rested on the woman's figure.

"She was that overcome with the announcement of the murder, and the guilt of her husband, that she fainted dead away," went on the servant.

The detective's face became sphinx-like with sudden determination.

"Leave me," he said.

The mystified servant obeyed him, while Falcon moved toward the darkened drawing-rooms. He glided down their length and reached the curtains of the library.

"I think I understand the affair now," he murmured.

Creeping cautiously forward, he came unobserved directly behind the woman, and in a low intense whisper murmured a name:

"Florine!"

The veiled figure started violently and turned with a quick ejaculation.

Then as she seemed to survey him closely beneath her veil, she renewed her sobbing. The detective's face hardened. He believed he had penetrated the schemer's motives.

This was, he reasoned, La Belle Florine, in possession of Lawndale as Ellis Searle's wife.

"Madam," he said, "I know you."

The veiled figure arose and faced him agitatedly.

"Sir—" she began.

"That will do," interrupted the detective, sharply. "Your game is up, my lady, you have betrayed yourself."

In real or affected fright she shrunk from

him. Falcon seized her arm in a vise-like grasp.

"I know you," he spoke, intensely. "I know your accomplices. I shall place you under arrest, for you are not Ellis Searle's wife. You are an impostor."

"An impostor," gasped forth the woman.

"Are you mad? Unhand me, sir! or I will call for help!"

"You cannot deceive me. You are La Belle Florine!"

An anxious tremor seemed to convulse the woman's form. In low hissing tones her lips framed the words:

"Prove it."

"I shall. You have played a shrewd game, but you have neglected one point. Ellis Searle's papers have been found. Among them, is the picture of his wife. Ah! you tremble!"

He released his grasp and took out the pocket-book. Seizing the picture, he had found there he held it aloft.

"Impostor! I will tear your mask aside," he cried.

He seized her veil quickly and tore it away, revealing a pale dark face from which a pair of gleaming eyes confronted him.

He directed one quick glance at the picture and one at the beautiful countenance before him.

Then Falcon started back with a wild cry of amazement.

For the face in the picture and the one that confronted his bewildered vision were the same.

CHAPTER VI.

SCHEMERS AT WORK.

FALCON was intensely mystified.

He had been betrayed into rapid definite action at a vital point in the game, and as he read deftly the beautiful face before him, he realized that he had met a foe able to cope with all his shrewdness.

If its possessor was, as he believed, La Belle Florine, whom he had never seen, some concealed power made her bold and defiant.

In a flash he comprehended the secret of the similarity of the two faces. The picture in the pocket-book was not that of Myrtle Winthrop, but had been placed there purposely to deceive.

"I have made a bad break," he murmured. "I must repair it. It will not do to arrest the woman with the secret of her plots still concealed, the success of her assumption closely guarded."

He was positive, however, as to her identity, as she stood facing him pale and indignant.

"This outrage—" she cried.

Falcon bowed humbly, deferentially.

"Madam," he said, in tones of deep apology, "I have a thousand pardons to ask."

She seemed completely deceived by his mock humility.

"This insult amid my distress and trouble! Oh, Ellis! Ellis! what cruel fate has followed us?"

She broke down in a storm of sobs and tears, while the detective seemed deeply affected.

"As an officer of the law," he said, deprecatingly, "I acted rashly. You are Ellis Searle's wife. Then you must help me to learn the truth of to-night's tragedy."

She did not reply to him, and, when she finally abruptly moved across the apartment, her actions startled the detective.

She had checked her exhibition of grief, and her face pale and woful, her eyes wearing a keen reproach, she seated herself at an open desk.

"She believes she has deceived me, she intends to deepen the delusion," breathed Falcon.

The woman shut her lips sternly, and wrote rapidly for a minute or two. Then she turned upon the silent detective.

"You have doubted my being Ellis Searle's wife," she said steadily, almost coldly.

"It was an unpardonable error, madam—"

"Nevertheless, I cannot endure being considered an impostor. Read that."

She handed the detective the paper she had written. He started violently, for it was a telegram directed to a clergyman at Belleville.

The name was the same as the one attached

to the marriage-certificate, and the writing read:

"Come here at once. A question has arisen as to my identity as Mrs. Ellis Searle."

For a moment Falcon was staggered. Could this really be Ellis Searle's wife. If not, what was the secret of her boldness? What could she hope to gain amid so brief an imposture as hers must certainly prove if that message was responded to.

"Send that telegram," said the woman sharply.

"But, madam—"

"I insist upon it. I can endure no imputation upon my reliability."

She had turned to the chair near the dead body. Drawing her veil about her face and relapsing into her grief-stricken attitude, she seemed again absorbed with her sorrow.

Falcon stole from the room, and returned to the reception apartment his eyes aglow with reflective thought.

If the woman was indeed an impostor, her bold movements would have deceived an ordinary detective, but Falcon was not easily deluded.

Opening the pocket-book, a satisfied smile crossed his lips as he compared the telegram with the letters in the book signed by Myrtle Winthrop.

The handwritings were entirely dissimilar. The woman in the library was not Ellis Searle's wife, and her boldness had caused her to overreach herself.

"I will send the telegram," decided the detective. "I will also send a message to a member of the French Consulate who can identify La Belle Florine. She hopes to throw me off the track, but what can she hope to gain, knowing that she must be unmasked within a very few hours?"

"I must not lose sight of her for an hour," decided Falcon.

He believed he could trust the servant and he summoned him and directed him to proceed to the village and send the two telegrams.

Then he left the house and paced the grounds abstractedly.

An hour later he learned that the supposed wife of Ellis Searle had been apportioned a room for the night.

Accepted as the bride of the unfortunate Searle, she was treated with respect by his uncle's household.

The detective located her apartment on the ground floor. From a clump of bushes he controlled a direct view of its windows.

The hours wore on toward morning, but he still remained at his post. The woman evidently meditated no movement that night.

It was nearly daybreak when the detective was suddenly aroused to the keenest watchfulness and interest. A form stealthily crossed the lawn. Despite its rough apparel and heavy bearded face, Falcon recognized the intruder.

"Rodney Wayne!" murmured Falcon, "what is his mission here?"

He was soon to know. Wayne surveyed the mansion and grounds carefully. No one was in sight. He skirted the structure, and at last halted within a few feet of the secreted detective.

He finally approached the very window Falcon had been watching, and tapped upon the window-pane.

The light in the apartment was extinguished, the curtain drawn. As the window was cautiously raised, a woman's face peered forth.

On the still air echoed to the listening detective's ears a word was whispered cautiously by the woman:

"Wayne!"

"Yes. You have succeeded?"

"In every detail."

"And Ellis Searle?"

"Is safely disposed of."

Wayne uttered an ejaculation of satisfaction.

"You must move at once," he said. "If our game should be suspected—"

"It is already."

Wayne started wildly.

"Already?" he repeated, sharply.

"Exactly."

"By whom?"

"By a detective I do not know, a man who has long bushy hair, and an extravagant mustache."

"Heavens! the pretended musician, the man who played La Belle Florine. We are lost!"

The woman laughed lightly.

"Not yet," she replied, confidently. "I have thrown him off the trail."

"How?" demanded Wayne.

"By boldly demanding, when he claimed I was not Ellis Searle's wife, that the clergyman be sent for."

"Are you mad?"

"No."

"But if he should arrive and unmask you?"

"By that time the secret involved in all this plotting will be ours."

"You are sure?"

"Yes. You must come to the mansion, disguised, about noon."

"And you?"

"Will be ready for operations. The keys I can secure. You understand?"

"Perfectly. At noon. The old wing, the secret, and flight."

"And then the real Myrtle Searle, and the fortune," interjected the woman. "Do not fail me."

Wayne glided from the spot, and the woman retired within the room.

Falcon arose from his place of concealment and started directly for the village.

"At noon, the wing, the secret," he repeated, ominously. "Good enough, my fair friend, whom I now know to be La Belle Florine. At noon Rodney Wayne will be there. At noon, I, too, will be on hand to foil your game, and learn the true inwardness of this mysterious plot."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET OF THE SKELETON.

"At noon," Falcon had said, "I will be on hand," and the day's meridian witnessed the redemption of his boast—but it was in a manner and under a role most shrewd and perfect.

That morning a man, announcing himself as an artist, had appeared before the head servant.

The very ideal of a strolling painter, despite the gloomy influences of the tragedy of the night previous, the detective had won the servant's good graces.

He expressed a desire to paint a view down the river, and an hour later he had scaled a balcony near the wing, half-hidden by vines, and had set his easel before him.

"The servant himself did not suspect my identity," murmured Falcon, complacently. "I will risk that the others do not."

He had gained a position where he could command a perfect view of the one entrance to the old wing, and while pretending to be painting, he kept his eyes fixed on the secret corridor leading to the deserted portion of the mansion.

He began to grow impatient as the hours wore on, and no move was made by Florine toward keeping her appointment with Rodney Wayne.

The delay puzzled the detective more than a little. He had concluded to descend from his lofty perch, when an anticipated vision necessitated his doing so.

Two forms had entered the corridor. The figure of a woman, after lingering for a moment or two to see if any one was following, proceeded to the strong mailed door of the wing.

It was some moments before she could unlock it; then she disappeared, followed by her companion.

Falcon reached the corridor a minute later. In the shadows of dusk he opened the door through which the two had passed, and stood in a musty, disused apartment.

In the next one, long gone to decay, a light gleamed. Peering forth, the detective saw that the woman had lighted a lamp. Its rays showed her companion to be a professional-looking man, wearing glasses.

"That man is Wayne," decided the detective.

The tones of the woman's companion verified his suspicions.

"Why have you delayed, Florine?" he asked.

"Because I had difficulty in finding an opportunity to search the desk, and so many people have come."

"This delay may be dangerous."

"How?"

"The evening train will be certain to bring the clergyman."

"Well?"

"And the detective."

"He has disappeared. Come, we must not trifle. Take the lamp, and lead the way."

Falcon trailed them closely as they penetrated a dozen apartments, ascended a flight of stairs, and at last halted in a room high-ceilinged but time-worn and dusty.

"The air here is oppressive," said the woman.

She proceeded to a window looking out on the balcony, and flung it open.

Wayne uttered a quick ejaculation of dismay.

"Are you mad?" he cried.

"What do you mean?"

"A light seen in this old deserted place."

The woman laughed recklessly.

"Can only be observed from the river," she replied, coolly, "and will simply cause superstitious alarm."

She had drawn a bunch of keys from her pocket. She flung them on the table and pointed before her. Sunk in the wall was a rusted iron door. That it led to a vault was evident.

The detective, peering from the shadow of the next apartment, watched the two plotters interestedly. Soon he would know their deep schemes, he felt assured.

"To work," cried Florine, imperatively. "We have no time to lose."

Rodney Wayne took up the keys and began adjusting them to the lock. For fully five minutes he endeavored to open the door, which swung back finally.

"At last," he cried, his eyes flashing triumphantly.

The woman handed him the lamp. He eagerly moved forward, and then staggered back, his face deadly pale.

"What is the matter?" she demanded sharply.

"That place, that sight."

"Poltroon!"

She hissed out the words angrily, and tearing the lamp from his hand, she brushed him aside.

"Have you no courage to be afraid of a skeleton?" she taunted.

Wayne, his eyes half averted, stood aside, trembling violently. Falcon's glance fixed on the light revealing the interior of the vault was interested and horrified. Its rays showed upon the floor of the vault a ghastly grinning skeleton.

"The man whose name must have been Winthrop, whom Anson Drexel accidentally killed," murmured Falcon. "It must be he. But these ghouls!"

Their work seemed to refer entirely to the skeleton. The woman with a defiance of terror that showed the fiendish instincts of her true nature, had set the lamp on the floor by the side of the skeleton.

The detective saw her grope over some time-worn garments. Parts of these still hung to the white bones of the skeleton.

Finally, a metallic sound was heard, and Florine raised aloft a small, oblong object.

"Success," she cried.

She had taken up the lamp, and hurried into the outer apartment. Rodney Wayne, closing the vault door, hastened to her side.

"You have found it?" he demanded breathlessly.

"Yes, a little tin box, see."

She had opened it as she spoke.

"And the paper! the secret! it is there?" cried Wayne.

"Look for yourself."

She raised a yellow paper from the box.

"That makes our fortune," she cried triumphantly. "Is it worth the killing of Anson Drexel, our trouble, and plots?"

"If it tells as was promised of Elwyn Winthrop's hidden fortune, yes," replied Wayne.

"It does," came the slow response, as the woman viewed the unfolded document.

"Ah! what is this?"

She had removed a second paper from the box. As she perused it, she uttered a wild ejaculation of alarm.

"What is it?" demanded Wayne.

"A mystery, a document completely exonerating Anson Drexel from the crime of killing Elwyn Winthrop."

"Impossible!"

"It is true. But the secret of the fortune. Ah! of that only we must think now."

The detective saw her eyes gleam triumphantly as she placed the box with the precious document in her bosom. Then she turned to Wayne.

"Go," she said.

"Alone?"

"Yes, we may be suspected. I will follow in a few moments. Signal if there is any danger. If not, go to the city, the Casino, at once."

"Then you intend—"

"To leave here; why should we remain?"

"That is true, the fortune, the girl we are having watched. We have nothing to fear now."

"Not even the vain threat of Kepler the detective!" cried La Belle Florine exultantly.

"Not even his threat, Falcon, for sooth! Kepler counted on his friend too surely."

Wayne passed from the apartment as directed by the woman, and the detective heard him groping his way toward the stairs beyond him.

Then Falcon glided forward, and before the amazed Florine had discovered his presence, he had caught her hand in a tight clasp.

Facing her boldly, his accusing glance driving her face to the ashen hue of terror, he said sternly:

"Murderess! Fiend! Falcon is here."

CHAPTER VIII.

A WOMAN'S SHREWDNESS.

LA BELLE FLORINE tore herself from the grasp of the detective with a wild cry of amazement and terror.

"You here!" her bloodless lips gasped forth. "I am lost."

Her treasured secret seemed her first thought, however, and the detective saw her hand go quickly to her bosom and draw thence the little tin box.

Secreting it in the folds of her dress, she stood fierce, hunted, white as death, at bay.

"I will take that, madam."

Falcon's face, stern, accusing, showed his determination and he moved forward as if to wrench the treasured casket from her hand.

Florine's eyes gleamed murderously. She drew with her other hand a gleaming stiletto. Waving it aloft, she defied the detective.

"Advance at your peril!" she cried. "I will resist to the death."

Falcon laughed harshly.

"Do you imagine your game is not ended?" he demanded.

"I do."

"You think I will allow you to leave the room with the secret of that little box?"

The woman's hand seemed to clasp the hidden casket nervously.

"Beware!" she hissed out.

"Of what?"

"Of that you do not know with all your shrewdness."

Falcon eyed her keenly.

"More mystery," he murmured contemptuously.

"Ay, you have been watching me. Well and good. But you have not one definite charge against me."

He felt the truth of her statement, but did not show it.

"I shall have those papers all the same," he said quietly.

"Then you block a game involving human life, reputation and wealth you little dream of."

"What are you hinting at?"

"Death! disaster!" hissed out the woman. "Detain me, and the murderer of Anson Drexel will never be found."

"The assassin is already known."

"It is false. Ellis Searle's fate will be a mystery, and others, yourself among them, will die."

He traced in her words the latent power of some hidden plot, yet realizing that the papers in Florine's possession held the vindication of Anson Drexel, the secret to Elwyn Winthrop's fortune, Falcon decided on his course.

"I arrest you," he said. "Your mysterious plot behind this initial preface of crime, I shall learn."

"Never!"

"And when I know the fate of Kepler, if that fate is death, Heaven help you and all your guilty accomplices."

Falcon spoke with terrible emphasis. The woman fairly shrunk back as she realized what an implacable foe this man would be with personal vengeance and the claims of justice to urge him on to action.

She shuddered violently, and then her eyes looking beyond the detective, brightened quickly, causing Falcon to turn like a flash.

He could not discern the cause of her sudden veiled excitement, but noticed that her hand was working nervously in the folds of her dress.

"The box!" demanded Falcon.

He extended his hand.

"Take it, but never from me."

"La Belle Florine lifted her hand and with a violent fling threw the box over the detective's head.

He failed in catching it, and saw it fall on the balcony outside the window. In the act he realized the desperation of a trapped adventurer.

She hoped to rob him of the victory of securing the papers for which she had plotted. He understood also that she counted on his hurrying after the tin box, and when his attention was diverted, she would attempt escape.

Falcon backed slowly to the window. He had drawn a revolver.

"My lady," he said, between his set teeth, "I shall foil your game."

"What! threaten a woman?"

"No! A base adventuress. Try to escape before I secure that box and—"

"You would shoot me?"

"Like any other assassin!" came the cool reply.

He stepped through the window, still facing her. Reaching back on the balcony, he groped for the box. His hand thrilled quickly as he secured it.

He lowered the revolver to step back into the room.

The eyes of La Belle Florine burned like two sinister stars, and her bosom was heaving with wild excitement.

"Now!"

She interjected the word suddenly, as with the ferocity of a tigress she sprung toward the detective. At the same moment, Falcon was seized from behind.

He struggled vainly.

A pair of strong arms pinioned him securely, while the woman's jeweled fingers clutched his throat.

"Down him! kill him!" she hissed venomously.

The voice of Falcon's captor spoke in reply.

"But the box?"

"It is empty. I took out the papers—it was a ruse."

The detective recognized his captor by his voice. It was Rodney Wayne who had unobservedly stolen back to the room and to the balcony.

The fierce assault of the two plotters held Falcon completely at their mercy. They bore him backward. The detective's eyes swept a darkly gleaming surface far below.

"The river," cried Florine, "it will finish him."

Falcon managed to tear one hand free. Another second of time and he would have downed his foes.

But just then their mingled force sent him over the railing, at which he caught with one hand in his descent.

La Belle Florine flashed the stiletto across his vision. Its keen blade swept the clinging hand.

"The fall, the deep waters, the steep rocky banks—you are done for, Falcon!" she cried, exultantly.

The detective dropped like a shot, but up from the darkness, in taunting tones, came his ominous words:

"We shall meet again. The river! you send me to my element. As well try to drown a water-rat!"

CHAPTER IX.

A PERILOUS DESCENT.

SPLASH!

One sound broke the brooding silence of the dark night as the light disappeared from the room in the deserted wing.

The descent from the balcony had been

almost direct. The detective's body struck a jutting rock, slid down a brush-covered incline, and then was precipitated into the chilling waters of the river.

He arose to the surface of the stream with a grim ejaculation of disgust, but his reference to his aquatic powers was not boastful.

He got his bearings, saw the impossibility of clambering up the steep banks, and proceeded to swim the broad stream.

He thrust the tin box which he had retained into a pocket.

"Empty, but a reminiscence of this little episode," he murmured, somewhat ominously.

He realized one fact. Before he could again reach Lawndale, the plotters would have disappeared. It meant hide and seek for the next few days, he decided.

His progress through the water was natural and rapid. This accomplishment, and his general athletic powers, had aided him in many a perilous trail.

It was fully nine o'clock when he came in sight of Lawndale again. A brief inquiry evoked the fact that La Belle Florine had mysteriously disappeared.

She had accomplished her mission at Lawndale, Falcon had lost sight of her, but he knew her motives now.

She hoped to secure a fortune, crime and mystery had marked her course toward its attainment. Beyond was some deep plot he had not yet fathomed. Silence and patience would develop its workings.

He must learn who murdered Anson Drexel, must secure the stolen papers. He must also see the real Myrtle Winthrop, to whom Wayne had referred in his letter. Against this woman, Ellis Searle's wife, the plotters evidently had some deep design.

The interest in the case still centered around Florine, and forthwith Falcon set out on the trail of his foes.

In the conversation between Florine and Wayne in the old wing, a single location had been mentioned. It was the Casino.

Well posted in the dark corners and byways of New York city, Falcon believed he could locate his man if Wayne followed Florine's directions, and the next morning found him under a new disguise on the trail of his enemies.

It was nearly night when he made a discovery of importance. The Casino was a portion of a thickly-built block of structures given over to various industries.

It included a large saloon and lodging-house. Adjoining was a dance-hall. The saloon proper, with its rooms, was evidently given over to select patronage.

Falcon found it best not to attempt to venture within its precincts in search of his man. From a window in an adjoining building, however, he had made a startling discovery. He had seen the man Rodney Wayne in an apartment looking out on the court, and in confidential conversation with another occupant of the place.

From the appearance of the man and the place, it seemed that they were making some important arrangements to leave the city.

The detective descended to the court. He had seen hanging directly beneath the window of the room occupied by Wayne, a swinging rope that had evidently been employed by roofers.

It reached to the ground, and Falcon, an expert at climbing, determined on a bold move. He seized the rope and began a perilous ascent, reaching the window-sill, and leaning upon it, then he peered within the apartment.

Elated at his undetected success he listened intently. Wayne was seated at a table with a man. That the latter was a new accomplice, Wayne's first words indicated.

"And Florine, Smith?" Wayne was asking.

"Bids you employ caution."

"Why?"

"She fears the game so carefully brought to success at last, may be suspected."

"By whom?"

"The detectives."

"They know nothing of it except Falcon."

"And he?"

"Is probably food for the fishes at the bottom of the Hudson. However, I will do as she wishes."

"And meet her at the theater?"

"Yes, at eleven o'clock. Then she must arrange to leave the city. Remember the girl Myrtle Winthrop, and the other part of our plan."

"All is ready in that direction."

"Very well. Our prisoner, too, he must be settled. Ha! What was that?"

Intently listening, Falcon had leaned almost into the open window. He drew back quickly, but not in time to prevent Wayne taking the alarm. The latter sprung suddenly to the window.

The detective saw that he must inevitably be discovered and seized the rope to descend. In doing this, the light from the window revealed him perfectly.

"A spy! Falcon himself!" rung wildly from Wayne's lips.

The detective made a bold move to descend quickly, but Wayne drew a knife at the same moment.

With a single sweep he drew its glittering blade directly across the rope and before Falcon could recover himself, he shot downward with the velocity of light.

He was borne to the ground with a shock. His limbs seemed broken by the fall, and he could not raise himself.

In a few moments he knew Wayne and his accomplice would descend to the court.

The end of a ventilator projected from the building, almost at his side. He must secrete himself some way till he regained his strength.

He crept boldly into the open shaft, trusting himself to its darkness rather than the tender mercies of his murderous enemies.

He lay perfectly still, once drawn out of sight, wondering if his injuries were serious.

Voices sounded from the outside a minute later. The tones of Wayne's accomplice echoed on the detective's strained hearing.

"He is not here; he is gone."

"Gone!" cried Wayne, wildly. "Impossible! the fall must have crippled him."

"You see for yourself," replied Smith.

"He is nowhere visible."

"Curse him! he has a dozen lives. There is no time to spare."

"What shall we do?"

"Get ready at once and leave here before he sends the hounds of the law on our trail."

The detective heard their footsteps leave the place and he struggled to exercise his cramped limbs.

He found that they had been numbed by the shock of the fall.

He started to retreat from his unpleasant position. In the darkness his hand came in contact with an opening in the zinc ventilator, cold fingers seemed to grasp his own with a violent clasp at that moment.

He could hear some one breathing directly below him, while a voice spoke feebly, rapidly:

"Is some one there—some unfortunate like myself?"

Falcon thrilled to quick wonder.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"A prisoner, drugged, starved, dying in the hands of villains."

"Ha, that voice!" gasped the detective.

In a flush of wild excitement, Falcon drew a match from his pocket, lit it tremblingly and lowering it peered through the aperture. Below and beyond it was a dark underground apartment. Clinging to the ventilator was a man utterly wretched in the pallor of his face and his disordered attire.

With startled eyes the detective surveyed him, then the match went out. Falcon uttered a surging aspiration of mingled wonder and delight.

"Merciful Heavens!" he cried, "that voice, that face! Ellis Searle, I have found you at last."

CHAPTER X.

THE MISSING FOUND.

FALCON'S discovery was a startling and important one. Step by step he had been led through an intricate maze of mystery to the present *denouement*.

The man behind the grating, a prisoner, was the nephew of Anson Drexel the murdered capitalist, and in the flash of the burning match, the detective had fully recognized him, the discovery thrilling him strangely.

"You know me?" came in a gasping, surprised cry from Ellis Searle's lips.

"Yes, I know you."

"And are my friend?"

"To the last. Ellis Searle, we are both in a strange dilemma, but it opens to both the light."

"The light! What mean you?"

"Upon your uncle's murder!"

"Great Heavens, he is dead then?"

"He is, and you are suspected of his murder. Indeed you yourself are believed to have been killed in escaping after shooting Anson Drexel."

"Horrible," cried the prisoner. "Man, whoever you are, tell me if you can, the motives prompting the occurrences of the past forty-eight hours, a mystery, a haunting dream to me."

His trembling hands closed over those of the detective while in the intense blackness of the strange wretched place, face to face, low impressive words fell from Falcon's lips.

Occasional murmurs of horror, amazement, despair, interrupted his startling recital. The detective began with the letter received from Kepler, his fellow-officer, and he detailed briefly what he knew of La Belle Florine, Wayne and their schemes.

He brought the recital down to the present moment and when he had concluded, Ellis Searle was for some moments too overcome to speak; finally in a choked, fear-filled voice he asked:

"What are the fiends plotting for?"

"Can you not see? The hidden fortune of Elwyn Winthrop."

"Of Elwyn Winthrop! Tell me, tell me," cried Ellis, excitedly. "Can it be that fate led me to wed one of the children of that unfortunate man?"

"It certainly looks so."

"Why?"

"Because these villains have some plot in which your wife is involved."

"And I powerless to aid and protect her."

"You will not be so long. I shall release you, we will hunt down this woman La Belle Florine, arrest her accomplices, and secure the papers they have stolen."

"Oh, do not delay. Myrtle, my darling wife! What if some peril we cannot comprehend already surrounds her."

"Be calm. One question. How came you to know Lynn Watson, *alias* Rodney Wayne?"

"I met him at Belleville incidentally."

"And that scene in the library, where your uncle was killed?"

"Alas! that I was too late to prevent the murder. Looking up I saw a door behind him open."

"And a pistol appear."

"Yes, held by a human hand."

"That of a man?"

"No. A woman."

"You saw her face?"

"I did."

"And would know it again?"

"Among a thousand."

Falcon's eyes gleamed like two stars of light in the darkness.

"La Belle Florine," he murmured intensely. "The crime can be traced more easily than I hoped for. Go on."

"I fired, and sprung after the flying figure. I reached the little corridor, was overpowered by some companion of the woman, and—"

"And then?"

"I remember no more. I think I was borne to a boat and brought hither, and here I have lain stunned with some powerful drug until now. Hark!"

"What is it?"

"Some one is coming."

"Where?"

"In the hall without."

Footsteps echoed on the hearing of the detective.

"Take this," he whispered.

He pressed a revolver into the trembling hand of the prisoner as the door of the prison-place was rattled visibly.

It was unlocked, and a man entered the room. A lantern in his hand. Ellis Searle had shrunk to the wall of the apartments while Falcon, drawing back from the ventilator, watched the intruder in profound amazement.

At a glance he recognized him as Smith, and as he did so the detective theorized that, about to abandon the place with Wayne, he had come to dispose of his prisoner. The two plotters were doubtlessly about to meet La Belle Florine at some place as alluded to by Wayne.

Smith's eyes gleamed determinedly, murderously, as he set the lantern on the floor. His hand held behind him, it clasped a bright unsheathed knife.

The detective resolved to evade a noisy conflict if possible. He knew that Ellis Searle armed was fully able to cope with his foe. But he trusted rather to his own shrewdness to silence and securely overcome their enemy.

He made ready to spring through the ventilator aperture, and suddenly shouted out the word:

"Smith!"

The startled man came directly to the spot, then his lips framed the single word:

"Help!"

The cry gurgled in his throat, for, in a flash, Falcon had sprung through the aperture.

The detective fell directly on the man, bearing him violently to the ground, while Ellis Searle sprung to the side of the pinioned Smith and pressed a hand over his mouth to prevent any outcry.

Falcon leveled the revolver at the villain's head.

"Cry out, or move, and I kill you!" he said, ominously.

The detective directed a rapid course of action by ordering Searle to disarm Smith; then he released his hold on the captive.

Smith started to his feet, but fell mute and terrified against the wall, for Ellis Searle held the revolver over him, a menace to silence.

The excitement of the moment made Falcon forget his injuries, and confronting Smith, he questioned him threateningly, imperatively.

"You came here to kill this man," he said. "Instead, we will coolly proceed to kill you, if you do not truly reply to some questions I have to ask."

Smith, sullen and silent, eyed the detective malignantly.

"Where is Wayne?" demanded Falcon.

"Gone to the theater."

"Where?"

Smith named a well-known place of amusement.

"For what purpose?"

The man hesitated.

"I know without your speaking—to meet La Belle Florine. Take off that coat."

Smith thought it best to obey.

Falcon coolly appropriated the garments of Smith, and then cast a handkerchief to Searle.

"Tie that man," he ordered.

His companion did so.

"Gag him securely."

In less than a minute the scowling Smith, denuded of his apparel, lay on the floor a helpless prisoner.

"Now follow me."

Ellis Searle took up the lantern. Falcon opened the door, locked it on their prisoner, and stood silently reflecting for a moment or two.

His boldness of action amazed Searle, but he was silent. The detective finally determined on a forward move. Without meeting any one, they reached the third story.

Falcon made a quick calculation as to locality, and entered a room. His eyes brightened as they swept the apartment.

"This is Wayne's room. Yonder the window where I so nearly met my death!" he murmured.

Upon a chair were several suits of clothes, doubtlessly belonging to Smith.

Falcon tossed them over and selected a suit.

"Put that on," he said, simply.

Ellis Searle with an innate confidence in his strange friend, obeyed him. The detective completed their disguise and proceeded toward the door but paused abruptly.

"You understand what I am about to do?" he asked of Searle.

"Yes, you are going on the trail of my enemies."

"And my own. Have you the courage?"

Ellis Searle uttered a confident ejaculation.

"After what I have suffered!" he cried.

"I trust in you. Follow me and obey my every instruction. This hour holds important issues at stake for you."

"You mean?"

"The recovery of the stolen papers. A

complete knowledge of the plots surrounding yourself and the woman you love."

They proceeded from the apartment as Falcon spoke.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DETECTIVE'S RUSE.

"YONDER is our man."

"In that box?"

"Exactly. Keep track of me until the woman La Belle Florine appears."

"She will appear?"

"Beyond doubt."

"And then?"

"Keep her in view every moment. If she leaves here, follow her."

Falcon had spoken the directions and received Ellis Searle's replies as they stood within the crowded theater hall.

The place was alive with excitement and confusion, for the theater was the scene of a great dramatic event. An immense gathering thronged the seats and lobbies among whom the detective had at last discovered the object of his search.

A man he had recognized as Wayne had come under his observation. He was disguised, and sat in the shadow of a private box, and a moment's keen study convinced Falcon that this was Rodney Wayne.

The detective who had copied every detail of Smith's *personnel* moved toward the box and opening the door leaned toward Wayne, touching him on the arm. The other started and eyed him complacently.

"You, Smith?"

"Yes."

"And the prisoner?"

"Settled."

Falcon, delighted at so readily deceiving Wayne trusted his powers of imitation only sufficient to answer briefly. Wayne relapsed into silence and stood reflectively watching the gathering crowd.

Falcon started into renewed interest as his companion uttered a satisfied ejaculation.

"Florine at last," he heard Wayne murmur.

As he spoke, a woman richly dressed and deeply veiled, was led to the box by an usher. Her dress did not conceal those outlines of form familiar in Florine to the detective.

"It is she," he decided, and prepared for action.

A glance showed him Ellis Searle under an opposite balcony, his eyes fixed on the woman.

Florine entered the box and sunk to a chair. The detective, drawing back into the shadow, pretended to be engrossed in watching the play, but he lost not one word of the conversation that ensued.

"Why all this caution?" he heard Wayne ask.

"Because I am superstitious, fearful, nervous, until we shake the dust of New York from our feet," returned Florine agitatedly.

"Then you fear—"

"Everything; we have left a long trail of crime behind us, Rodney Wayne."

"Why speak of it?"

"Because it haunts me, or rather its avenger, Falcon."

"He is dead."

"No. He will trail us yet if we are not cautious. We must act secretly. To-night we must leave the city. I shall feel relieved."

"And the papers?" asked Wayne, his eyes gleaming.

"They are safe, never fear."

"Surely you would not carry them—"

"With me; not yet. The man who gets them does so at deadly peril."

"What mean you?"

"They are safely guarded."

Falcon was puzzled to understand the woman's meaning, for her eyes gleamed significantly.

"Then for the present—"

"They are concealed in the red room in the cellar. Must I abandon my old profession and its accessories?"

"Entirely; what is the paltry salary you have earned in the past to the royal fortune awaiting you."

"True, true; we must not falter. I leave at midnight, papers and all, and meet you—"

"Two days later at—"

Wayne spoke the name so low, the detective could not hear it.

"And you," continued the woman, "will send for the animals and have them cared for."

"Yes; what address?"

La Belle Florine mentioned a number and street.

"Located at least," murmured the detective, triumphantly.

"We have yet a difficult task to execute," said Wayne, after a slight pause.

"You mean the affair of Myrtle Winthrop?"

"Exactly."

"That will not fail; trust me for it."

"Then the fortune?"

"And now money."

Wayne started.

"Money," he repeated, somewhat mystified.

"Yes; that was the reason for my coming here. I have none at my command."

Wayne twisted his mustache annoyedly.

"How much do you require?" he asked.

"Five hundred dollars."

"I have none with me."

"You must get it and send to me before midnight."

"Agreed. At my old room on Third avenue where I have not ventured since returning to the city. I have a small amount laid by."

"And I can depend upon it?"

"Without fail. Smith will bring it."

The woman arose, glanced keenly about them, and nodded adieu to Wayne.

Falcon could scarcely resist the impulse to follow her. He was satisfied that Searle would not lose her trail, as he saw the latter start after the disguised figure of the woman.

Wayne had spoken to him, and the detective could not leave him without exciting his suspicions.

"We will go," said Wayne.

"He will send me with the money," decided Falcon. "This affair is working better than I anticipated."

He kept close to Wayne's side, who secured a carriage at the street. It halted finally before a high brick building on Third avenue.

Wayne followed by the detective entered the place first, stopping at a room on the second floor to inquire if he had been sought for by any one during his absence.

Receiving a negative reply from a rough, low-browed, villainous-looking man, and his fears apparently allayed, Wayne ascended to a room and entered it.

The apartment looked out on the street, upon which, fifteen feet below, ran the elevated railway. Wayne threw up the window, lighted a lamp, and proceeded to a cabinet in one corner of the room.

For some time he looked over a lot of papers, destroyed several, and placed others in his pocket, paying no attention to the disguised detective, who patiently awaited his pleasure. At last Wayne counted out some bank bills, and inclosed them in an envelope.

"Smith."

Falcon arose and came to the desk.

"You are to take this letter to Florine."

"All right."

"What is that?"

About to extend the envelope Wayne withdrew it quickly and started to his feet, his face growing suddenly pale as a confused noise echoed from the hall without.

"What is it?" he repeated agitatedly.

"Can we have been tracked?"

A man's voice sounded in earnest discussion with some one who opposed his progress.

"I tell you I will see Wayne," he was shouting.

"What do you want of him?"

"That's my business. Stand aside."

Evidently Wayne's friend below, acting under instructions had endeavored to keep out an unknown visitor. The door was burst open with a crash. A wild-eyed, excited man crossed the threshold.

"Wayne."

The plotter stared wildly at the figure of the intruder while Falcon drew his breath hard.

"Smith!" came in a wild, gasping cry from Wayne's lips.

"The game is up," muttered the detective, grimly.

For he recognized the new-comer. The latter, his face pale and excited, his form covered with an old overcoat hastily thrown on, stood glaring at him.

Escaped in some mysterious manner, the real Smith had reappeared at a critical moment, and the detective prepared for a combat at close quarters.

"This man—"

Smith could go no further.

His trembling finger pointed at the detective; he seemed fairly choking with rage.

"Ha!" cried Wayne, retreating bewilderedly. "This man, passing himself off as you, is a spy—a detective!"

"Correct!"

Falcon described a doubly-effective movement as he shot out the word. There was no time for trifling. One hand clinched tightly delivered a blow directly in the face of the real Smith, sending him spinning to the floor.

The other made a sudden dive for Wayne's throat, and as the latter recovered from his amazement, moved to quickly evade the detective's grasp, his bloodless lips uttering the ominous words:

"Falcon, the detective!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEN OF HORRORS.

RODNEY WAYNE had drawn a revolver, while the real Smith, reeling under the blow of Falcon's clinched fist, lay stunned and motionless upon the floor.

The man who had attempted to prevent the entrance of the latter had peered in at the door, and then, with a cry of dismay, disappeared.

Mingling with the noisy rattle of a train on the rails without, came a dreadful report. Wayne had fired point-blank at the detective.

The latter, dodging aside quickly, escaped unhurt. He himself had drawn a weapon, and prepared grimly for a duel to the death, if necessary.

"Surrender, Rodney Wayne!" he cried, peremptorily.

"Never!"

"Your game is up."

"Not yet."

Wayne had taken advantage of the smoke from the explosion to retreat to the open window. His foot on the sill, he glanced below with the despair of a baffled fugitive. A network of iron rails and girders overspread the roadway.

He turned and directed the revolver at his foe. It exploded within two feet of the detective's breast, and the latter, about to fire himself, staggered back.

"I have settled him," cried Wayne wildly.

Then, as if under wild excitement, he leaped from the window.

Falcon sprang to his feet. The explosion from Wayne's revolver had struck one of the buttons on Smith's coat, and partially stunned and blinded the detective.

Glancing down, he saw Wayne clinging to the rails of the track over which a train had just passed, while a shout from an amazed policeman below started the fugitive across the girders to the other track.

Wayne gained the side planks of the railroad, and stood looking eagerly back of him.

A minute later a train dashed by. Glancing after it, the detective saw a form clinging desperately to the rear platform.

Wayne had escaped!

Falcon paid no attention to the prostrate Smith. Revolver in hand, he started rapidly for the street. No one opposed his progress.

"La Belle Florine," he murmured, "must be cornered at once."

He paused only to enter a second-hand clothes-dealer's. Emerging in new apparel a moment later, he hailed a cab and directed the driver to proceed with due diligence.

The vehicle paused in the vicinity of the location La Belle Florine had given Wayne. The detective dismissed the carriage, and paused before a large, gloomy structure.

"A boarding-house, apparently," he murmured, and entered the open door and traversed the lower hall.

A man, bearing a small box on his shoulder, was coming up from the basement, and Falcon stopped him.

"My man."

"Well, sir?"

"I am looking for a woman who stays here. A Miss Florine, I believe her name is."

The man eyed the detective suspiciously.

"Don't know her," he replied surlily, preparing to go on.

"She is an actress, or something of that sort."

"Oh, you mean Ayala. Just leaving. This is one of her boxes. I'll show you to her room."

Falcon drew back; he did not desire to confront the woman suddenly. A quick idea had come into his mind to first discover the secret papers.

The red room in the cellar, she had told Wayne. The man before him was doubtless bearing some of her property from that very apartment.

"No, no," said the detective, quickly; "I only wanted to locate her. I will call again."

He made a feint to leave by the front door. The man stared curiously at him, and began to ascend the rear stairs to another floor. Falcon stopped and turned back down the corridor, once he had disappeared.

A stairway led to a dark cellar. In this an open door showed a damp, underground apartment. It contained several small trunks and boxes, but what caused Falcon to thrill with quick excitement was the sight of an object La Belle Florine had referred to at the theater.

It was a heavy red door leading to some room beyond, and plainly visible from the light of a lantern dimly burning on the floor.

"The red room," murmured Falcon eagerly. "The papers were hidden there, Florine said."

He crossed the floor with a lingering wonder as to the usual profession of this woman, who had evidently been connected with a show of some kind.

His hand touched the unfastened padlock of the red door. He was about to force it open when he started violently.

Familiar voices were heard coming toward the cellar. One was that of Florine plainly distinguishable.

The detective was amazed to recognize her companion as Rodney Wayne, for his voice sounded on his hearing. Wayne had evidently managed to reach the house in advance of him. They were coming directly toward that room.

"They little suspect I am here," murmured the detective.

He glanced about him for some place to hide. Every word he could overhear of their conversation, before he closed their lips by arrest was important to an understanding of the mystery of their intended operations still undisclosed. There appeared to be but one way out of the dilemma. The red door showed a means of safe and temporary retreat.

Falcon opened the door and sprang into a darkened room. An indescribable sensation oppressed him as he drew to the door.

The air inside the apartment was warm, stifling and poison-laden. The atmosphere was musty, almost unbearable. A concerned murmurswept Falcon's lips as a singular growling sound echoed near to him.

La Belle Florine and Rodney Wayne had entered the next room and he heard them advance across the floor. The door opened and he could see them bearing between them a human form.

"Searle," breathed Falcon intensely excited. "He has fallen into her net."

For the helpless figure they laid on the floor was that of the young master of Lawn-dale. Evidently he had been discovered by La Belle Florine, and overpowered by herself and her allies. Wayne was wildly excited.

"If I did not kill Falcon, we had better be speedy in our flight," he was saying.

"I intend to," was Florine's reply.

"Can your man be trusted?"

"The one who carried the boxes? Yes, he leaves with me."

"Good. Now then about this troublesome prisoner."

"Ellis Searle?"

"Exactly."

"His troubles end here."

The woman's voice was ominous.

"What mean you?"

"No one will come to this cellar. He

would die of neglect and starvation, if another surer fate did not menace him."

"What are you hinting at?"

"This!"

Falcon, peering forth, saw the woman reach up and pull a wire hanging from the wall. They had laid Searle on the floor, and Wayne had brought a lantern into the room. Falcon, crouching behind a box watched them curiously.

As Florine pulled the wire a terrific growl sounded directly behind the detective.

"That will seal his doom," laughed Florine, her evil eyes filling with a sinister gleam that made Falcon shudder despite himself.

"The papers," said Wayne suddenly.

"Don't forget them."

"I took them from the box yonder ten minutes since."

"Then we are ready."

"To drop this end of the scheme. Yes—Quick!"

Florine retired suddenly toward the door, Wayne following her. Before Falcon could spring forward the door closed on them with a crash.

Florine's jeweled hand appeared at a little wicket suddenly opened in the door a minute later. Directing a malignant glance at the bound and insensible Searle, she said with triumphant emphasis:

"The last appearance of Ayala, queen of the tiger's lair."

A cold chill traversed the detective's frame at the utterance of those significant words. He sprung to his feet. A muffled roar sounded behind him. He understood now the allusion to Florine's animals.

The wire the woman had pulled had opened an iron gate at the end of the apartment. A dark live object bounded wildly across the room.

The woman, about to close the wicket, uttered a sudden ejaculation of amazement.

"Falcon!" she cried wildly, her eyes lighting on the detective.

The detective staggered where he stood, as a wild roar echoed through the room.

"My pets will finish them both. Falcon, your career is ended."

The woman's words mingled with the noise of the closing of the wicket.

The detective backed to the wall, and drawing a revolver, stood at bay, his face taking to its depths a white horror.

A sickening sensation of peril oppressed him with a nameless dread. A huge black form sprung over his head. A second, with glaring eyes, stood crouching a few feet away. A gasping, uncertain ejaculation swept the detective's lips.

"Tigers!" cried Falcon wildly, excitedly. "This human fiend has shut us in with her murderous pets to do her deadly work."

It was true. Two enormous Indian tigers, released from their cages beyond, glared and growled at the imperiled detective.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW MYSTERY.

FALCON was in a terrible predicament, whose very singularity and unusual menace at first unmanned him, but a thought of the issues at stake made him composed and courageous, and a look told him the extent of his peril.

There were two tigers in that room, furious, hungered, thirsting for his blood, and their movements became remarkably rapid as they filled the place with hideous howlings. The hand of the detective trembled as he drew a knife. He made a rapid swoop at one of the brutes which sprung at his head. The action drove the animal aside, but it began again to creep slowly toward him, lashing its tail furiously.

Falcon glanced with concern at his helpless companion, Ellis Searle, who lay insensible at his feet, and leaning over quickly, he severed the bonds securing him. As the second beast of prey poised half its length for a deadly spring, the detective again dodged aside, dragging Searle with him, although the latter was a burden and hindrance, insensible as he was.

Falcon glided to a box standing open in one corner of the room, and, dropping his burden into it, he shut down the cover. Searle was safe at least, and Falcon braced himself for a grim struggle.

The smaller of the two tigers uttering a

frightful roar, sprung a second time toward him. With one dexterous movement the detective dropped to his knee. He was deluged in blood as his knife-point was plunged into the throat of the tigress. The animal fell to the floor convulsed with dying pain and rage. Ere Falcon could turn, an ominous sound betokened another peril.

A swishing noise succeeded a hoarse growl, a heavy shock sent him staggering forward. The sharp claws of the second tiger pierced his shoulders. To drop to the floor meant certain defeat. He could feel the hot, hissing breath of the brute on his face, holding him at a terrible disadvantage.

In another moment those distended jaws would close over his face. He dropped the knife, and drawing a revolver thrust it over his shoulder. A pair of iron jaws closed upon his wrist. The revolver had been driven into the very mouth of the enraged tiger. Falcon pulled the trigger, and with a terrific shock the weapon exploded.

"Saved!"

The detective, trembling and weak, staggered to the chest and leaned upon it for support as the second tiger, its head literally blown to pieces, fell a quivering mass at his feet. Falcon's face, gradually relieved of its horror from the ordeal through which he had just passed, grew calm and determined.

"La Belle Florine!" he muttered hoarsely.

"The fiend shall pay the penalty of all her crimes."

He opened the box and endeavored to restore his friend, but it was fully an hour before Ellis Searle regained consciousness. He briefly told the detective of his mishaps—how he had followed La Belle Florine, and how he had come to this very house, reached the door of her room, and had been discovered by a man apparently an accomplice. In the struggle which ensued, he had been knocked insensible. Falcon's tale of horror furnished the *denouement* to the story.

"And you did not see her face?" the detective inquired.

Searle answered in the negative.

"Once identify her as your uncle's murderess and her game is ended," remarked Falcon ominously. "Come."

"Whither?"

"To essay an escape from this den."

The attempt involved several hours time, for the strong door resisted their first efforts to force it. At last, however, it gave way, at last they gained the outside corridor, and started at once for the apartments occupied by their dreaded foes.

They found Florine's room disordered and tenantless. Their enemies had taken flight. Falcon busied himself examining a pile of torn papers on the floor, and Searle, watching him, saw him smile significantly as he perused them. Then the detective led the way from the place.

He hailed a cab and gave a quick order. Searle did not question him when they reached a retired house in the upper portion of the city. The room the detective led him to was evidently his own apartment. Its occupant was deeply meditative, and Searle silently followed his instructions as Falcon made him assume a disguise and concealed his own identity under a new garb.

"We start on a long trail, perhaps," remarked the detective as they at last left the place.

"After Florine and her accomplice."

"Exactly," replied Falcon, glancing at his watch. "We have half an hour to catch the train."

"For where?"

"Belleville, first."

Ellis Searle uttered a cry of delight.

"The home of my wife," he said. "I shall see her at last!"

"Perhaps."

The ominous word struck a chill of dread to his heart.

"You fear that some peril—" began Searle anxiously.

"I fear nothing. I brave all. We have a mysterious quest before us. Courage and patience, and we will defeat the ultimate purpose of these plotters."

"What is that purpose?"

"To secure the fortune of Elwyn Winthrop."

"Through my wife?"

"Probably."

"But all this mystery?"

"Conceals a deep secret we shall soon learn. When we ascertain how these plotters know of your uncle's secret, we will have fathomed the mystery."

They reached a railroad depot from which a train was just about to leave as the detective spoke. He secured tickets and started for the cars when a voice spoke his name quickly.

"Falcon!"

He turned sharply. A man neatly attired grasped his hand.

"Ah! you, Meserve? From the chief's office?"

"Last night, yes, and looking for you. Lucky I stumbled over you."

"Why?"

"Orders from the department."

He handed the detective a packet of papers just as the engine announced the speedy departure of the train. There was therefore no time to examine the packet.

"Does this matter require an answer?" inquired the detective.

"No," replied the other, "only immediate attention."

"Very well. Tell the chief he can rely on me. Good-by. Come, Searle."

They hurried to the train. Ellis Searle's face wore an excited, suspenseful look. He glanced curiously, but silently, at the detective, as the latter opened the envelope inclosing the orders from his chief, which constituted a variety of papers. Among them was a portrait, at the sight of which Falcon uttered an ejaculation of profound surprise, while Searle stared in wonder at the photograph.

"That picture?" he cried.

"You recognize it?" inquired the detective.

"Recognize it! Yes. It is the picture of my wife."

A masked expression came over Falcon's face as he remarked quietly:

"You are mistaken."

"But those features! the eyes, her sunny smile—"

"It is not your wife's picture. Stop! You are about to question me, and I cannot answer, at least just yet. When we have visited Belleville, I will startle you with a new light on the diabolical plots of this infamous woman, La Belle Florine."

Ellis Searle sunk back in his seat with a sigh of impatience, and saw the detective place the papers in his pocket, and sit with drawn brows meditating perplexedly.

It was far in the day when they reached the little station called Belleville, which was located about fifty miles from Albany. The detective paused on the depot platform.

"This is the home of your wife?" he remarked.

"Yes."

"Then you will take the initiative. Prepare for surprises, Ellis Searle, but do not lose your head. A startling mystery awaits you."

The detective said no more, and Searle repressed his anxiety as he followed the former. The little cottage where Ellis Searle had left his wife one week previous was first visited. A wild alarm was manifested in the young man's eyes as, after a moment's absence, he returned with ghastly features to the waiting detective.

"Well?" inquired the latter.

"Myrtle is not there. She has not been there for five days."

"I expected that."

"The landlady says that she left very mysteriously, supposedly to join me at Lawn-dale."

"Indeed."

"Tell me, Falcon, you know, you suspect—"

"Everything. These villains have been at work. We will make some inquiries of the local police."

They reached the gloomy old structure used as a lock-up, where the detective had made only a few inquiries when the town marshal interrupted him.

"Myrtle Winthrop, eh?" he said; "well, we have a trace of her."

"Where?"

"In there"

The marshal pointed impressively at an inner room. Falcon advanced toward the door and pushed it open, and, Ellis Searle

crowding anxiously after him, he entered the apartment.

A cry of agony escaped the young man's lips; with staring eyes he stood transfixed.

Upon the floor lay a form silent in death. The long, dark hair and clinging garments were wet, as if their possessor had just been found in some body of water. Upon the breast was a red, discolored wound.

"Merciful Heaven!" gasped Ellis Searle, wildly.

"You recognize her?" demanded the detective.

An utterance like the despairing wail of a bereaved soul rent Ellis Searle's lips.

"Yes!" he gasped out, wildly, "it is my murdered darling, my own wife—Myrtle Winthrop!"

CHAPTER XIV.

TRACED DOWN.

SEARLE'S grief was pitiable as he stood looking down at the dead form. Another dreadful crime, it seemed, had marked the tragic course of La Belle Florine and her evil-hearted accomplices. The detective's face was grim and impressive as he drew Searle toward him.

"Come!" he said, imperatively; "we must leave here."

Searle shook off his grasp resentingly.

"Leave all I have left on earth!" he moaned, in broken tones.

"Your enemies, her assassins—have you no care for retribution, for justice?"

Searle swayed like a drunken man under this last dire bereavement, while the detective directed a few quick questions to the marshal.

The latter stated that the body had been found in the river near the town that morning. Falcon deftly drew his companion away from the dead-room into the outer air.

"Courage, hope!" he whispered. "Be brave and patient. If that is your wife, her murderer must be found."

"If it is my wife! Can you doubt it?"

"I most certainly do."

Searle stared at the detective as if he believed him gone suddenly insane.

"In the first place," resumed the latter, "you saw your wife a week since."

"Yes."

"The woman in yonder place has been dead longer than that."

Searle started.

"The face is discolored, though recognizable. You believe it to be your wife. One question will settle this matter. Had your wife a sister?"

"Great heavens! man, I see! But no! no!" cried Searle despairingly, "it is she; my Myrtle!"

"Answer my question. Had she a sister?"

"Yes."

"A twin sister?"

"I believe so. I never saw her. It was a secret Myrtle would not talk of."

"Why?"

"Because they had been parted a long time."

"At variance?"

"No; Eunice Winthrop was unfortunate. She met, loved, and wedded a villain."

"Ah! the light is breaking. And this sister—did she resemble your wife?"

"Myrtle told me she did."

"La Belle Florine's operations, then, are not based on any claim on her part to a family relationship," murmured Falcon. "The twin children of Elwyn Winthrop are found. You say she married a villain?" he asked aloud.

"So Myrtle told me."

"Who was he?"

"I never saw him."

"But his name?"

"Bruce Talbot."

"The game is out! Ellis Searle, we have fathomed all this mystery."

The detective spoke excitedly.

"What mean you?"

"That I now know all. The woman yonder is not your wife."

"Oh, if I could believe it!"

"I am positive of it. It is Eunice, her sister."

"But the substitution, if such it is—the appearance of the body here at Belleville?"

"Is part of Florine's scheme to delude you and Myrtle Winthrop's friends."

"Then Myrtle herself?"

"Is a prisoner in the hands of the plotters."

"For what purpose?"

"To carry out a deep scheme of fraud. The dead sister takes Myrtle Winthrop's place, and Myrtle Winthrop—"

The detective paused, while Searle looked anxious.

"Well?" he asked.

"Is spirited away, believed to be dead, to assume an important role in behalf of a murderer and a scoundrel."

"You mean—"

"Her husband, Bruce Talbot. Listen to me, Ellis Searle. I have the connecting link in all this affair. You saw the packet handed me at the train from the chief of police?"

"I did."

"It contained a photograph."

"Of my wife?"

"No; of the woman who so resembles her."

"Her sister, Eunice?"

"The same. The chief requested me to look up a very mysterious case."

"What was it?"

"At Albany, two weeks since, a man murdered his wife. The assassin was apprehended. That night the dead body of his victim was stolen."

"I begin to understand."

"A photograph of the dead woman was secured and copied and sent to other cities, where it was believed the body might be taken."

"And that picture?"

"Was the portrait of Eunice Winthrop."

"Myrtle's sister murdered—"

"By her husband, Bruce Talbot, yes. The man was in a bad fix. He had outside help. La Belle Florine and Wayne were his former accomplices in crime. They aided him."

"How?"

"By stealing the body. Bruce Talbot, as Eunice Winthrop's husband, knew something of her past, he knew there was a fortune secreted somewhere, probably some papers she had retained from childhood, told him this. He sold his information to Florine and Wayne."

"For what price?"

"His liberty. Do you not understand? He told them all. They were to trace down Elwyn Winthrop's fate. This brought them to your uncle's house, and led to all these crimes."

"But Myrtle?"

"Bruce Talbot knew she resembled his murdered wife. The real victim was stolen, and her body thrown in the river here. That was done to make people believe Myrtle Winthrop was dead."

"Go on," murmured Searle, excitedly.

"Then Myrtle was abducted. These villains intend forcing her to assume a new role."

"What role?"

"That I shall soon learn. Your wife is now completely in their power."

"But Myrtle would never consent to aid their plans."

"You underestimate Florine's audacity. These schemers could bring a powerful influence to bear upon her."

"What influence?"

"The fact of your guilt as an assassin."

Ellis Searle seemed to reel under the confusing elements in play. The detective, however, had convinced him of the truth. His thoughts turned from the agony of grief to the joy of hope.

"Myrtle alive," he cried, impassionately.

"Oh, if it is only true!"

"You will find it so."

"But they may have killed her, too."

"She is too necessary to their plots."

"Or already have carried out their plans."

"I happen to know to the contrary."

Searle started hopefully.

"You know where they are?"

"I do. Not five miles from here, and expecting to start for Albany to-morrow."

"How did you learn this?"

"From papers found in the room of La Belle Florine. This night, with caution and shrewdness, we shall block Florine's evil schemes."

Falcon had led the way directly from the village. Skirting the river, he engaged his companion in careless conversation, but his own manner betokened a close mental calcu-

lation regarding the case in hand. It had grown quite dark, but the detective seemed to understand perfectly where he was going, and at last he halted, pointing to some gleaming lights a mile distant.

"You are familiar with this locality?" he asked.

"Moderately so."

"And yonder lights betoken a settlement on the river called Felsden?"

"I believe so."

"Half a mile this side is an old factory and brewery."

"I have noticed it often."

"That is the place where your wife has been a prisoner for the past five days."

"Then we will rescue her at once!" cried Searle, impetuously.

"No, we must proceed with caution and close this case right. Time must not be afforded La Belle Florine to destroy the papers she holds."

"Ah, I understand."

"They may possibly have left for Albany already. If so, we nab them there."

The old factory, the vicinity of which they gained a few minutes later, was dark and apparently tenantless. The detective glided cautiously from tree to tree and among the shrubbery until he paused at a gate run on wheels.

This was the entrance to the lower story of the place. He opened the gate slightly, but no one was in view. At that moment Searle touched his shoulder.

"Look yonder," he said.

In an extension of the rambling old structure directly overlooking the river, a light was visible. The windows, half-hidden by vines, were accessible from a little ledge of rocks directly outside, and the detective glided toward the spot, Searle following him.

Both directed a simultaneous glance through the window, and both paused, intensely startled, for the room held three occupants. Two of them the detective was familiar with—Rodney Wayne and La Belle Florine.

The latter was veiled deeply. Either to hide her identity from accomplices of Wayne or for some prudential reasons of her own, her features were hidden.

By her side, glancing pale and terrified at the plotters whose influence evidently frightened her, was a beautiful girl. The detective readily understood who she was, for Ellis Searle's fervent words verified his suspicions.

"Thank Heaven!" gasped the latter. "We have found her, and alive. It is Myrtle, my wife!"

CHAPTER XV.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

WITHIN the apartment before him, Falcon knew a startling scene must necessarily ensue in a very few moments. He saw the two principal actors in a scheme of crime and avarice, whose arrest would certainly block the bold game of the miscreant murderer behind the bars of the Albany jail.

Success, certain, inevitable, thrilled the detective to a keen excitement, but he did not act precipitately. Warning his impetuous companion to silence and caution, he prepared to listen as the words spoken by the occupants of the room were borne audibly through the broken panes to the eavesdroppers' hearing.

"Why do you persecute me thus?"

The query was a despairing cry, which emanated from the lips of the beautiful victim of the hard-hearted schemers. As Falcon gazed at the speaker, he was astonished at her remarkable resemblance to the dead woman at the Belleville jail.

"No persecution is meant," spoke Rodney Wayne, in reply. "You are necessary to our plans. You have heard our demands; comply or refuse, as you wish."

"But what is this mystery?" cried Myrtle Winthrop. "It appalls and confuses me. You tell me that I must impersonate another for an hour or two—"

"Do you agree or not?"

La Belle Florine, the veiled woman, spoke sharply, impatiently, and Myrtle Winthrop shrunk from her with frightened pallor.

"My husband!" she cried. "Tell me, he is alive?"

"Yes, but under a dreadful charge of

murder. We alone can clear his name and save him from the gallows."

Myrtle Winthrop sunk to a chair, sobbing violently, but looked up suddenly and said:

"If I agree to your plans?"

"All will be well."

Rodney Wayne spoke quickly, but there was a sinister gleam in his eyes as they swept the girl's face.

"She accepts. Let us not delay. The men are ready," Falcon heard Florine say in a low tone to her companion, Wayne, who touched the girl's arm, and unlocked the door behind them. A man appeared at the other side.

"All right," said Wayne as the girl passed over its threshold.

"We are to proceed as you directed?" asked the man.

"Yes."

Ellis Searle had started forward as he saw Myrtle Winthrop disappear.

"They are taking her away," he whispered agitatedly.

"Silence!"

"We must rescue her."

"We shall. Obey me implicitly."

"In what?"

"In learning how many accomplices these plotters have. Go around the rear way and spy them out."

Falcon crouched low near the window as Searle cautiously disappeared. He believed his opportunity for action had come as he saw Wayne start to leave the apartment, but the woman taking the key from his hand moved from the room through the same door beyond which Myrtle had just disappeared.

Falcon blamed himself for procrastinating an arrest while the two main conspirators were together. However, it would be as well, he reasoned, to understand all the bearings of the case.

Half an hour of impatient waiting passed by, but no one came in view within the apartment. The detective, somewhat alarmed at Searle's continued absence, started to leave the spot when his attention was centered on a form coming toward him.

It paused, and he made out the hat and cloak worn by Searle, as their possessor lifted a beckoning hand. It made a motion, too, of caution, and Falcon crept after the figure, which led him toward the gate at the lower story.

"What is it? You have discovered something?" he whispered as he reached its side.

"Hist!"

The two crossed the floor of the place and reached a door which, opening, revealed a stairway. This the man ascended, the detective following close on his heels. At its top, his companion thrust the door suddenly open. At the same time he seized Falcon forcibly.

The latter, as a flood of light from the apartment illuminated the situation, started back. His suspicions aroused, he glanced quickly at his guide's face.

"Not Ellis Searle!" he cried.

"No. Falcon, you are in my power."

A woman's voice spoke. La Belle Florine stood in the center of the apartment. The guide and two others had suddenly seized Falcon. He was held securely by them, the woman's eyes gleaming from behind her veil malignantly.

"Tie and gag him," she ordered the men.

They obeyed her.

"You have disposed of the other?" she demanded of one of them.

The person addressed replied in the affirmative.

"It is well. His disguise deceived the spy. Now then, Falcon!"

The woman walked over to where the detective had been laid a helpless captive on the floor.

"Your friend Ellis Searle is out of the way at last," she said. "Crushed by the water-wheel below, he is safely removed from our path."

Falcon glared defiantly at the beautiful fiend.

"All our plans are safe enough as to you."

She paused and turned to one of the men.

"Lead this man, and follow me. I will see him settled for certain this time," she said.

Her accomplice obeyed her bidding, and Falcon was hurried from the room. The

woman went in advance, leading the way up several flights of stairs, and paused at last before an immense iron door.

Florine took a key from a hook in the wall and adjusted it to the rusted lock. The door opened slowly and creakingly. The action disarranged a steel spring, a part of the apparatus for holding it shut, which fell jangling to the floor.

"Look, Falcon, behold your doom," spoke Florine in tones which rung with a malignant enmity and satisfaction.

The detective never quailed, but his heart beat despairingly. The door opened on space. Evidently at some previous time an iron platform connected it with a wing of the mill directly opposite. Now only a blank void showed beyond the threshold of the door. He saw the fate that menaced him. Thrust over the abyss, a descent into the iron-covered yard below meant inevitable death. The woman Florine spoke a quick command to one of her companions.

"The knife," she breathed. "Then fling him over."

Both men released their hold on the detective, and the one to whom Florine had spoken stepped back quickly and drew a long, murderous-looking knife.

Falcon realized that a portentous hour in his fate had arrived. His feet were free, and as he thought of his athletic resources, he described a motion so quick and novel that it fairly bewildered his foes.

He took two steps backward, poised his wiry frame for a spring, lifted himself four feet from the floor, and projected his body forward. His feet struck out a terrific kick directly below the chest of one of the men, who sunk to the floor with a groan.

The other made a spring forward. The detective, reeling from the shock of his exploit, saw the knife descend. It grazed Falcon's shoulder, and ripping downward cut the bonds securing his hands clean in two.

Intensely excited, Florine and her accomplice endeavored to seize the released detective. Falcon had determined, however, to fight fiercely for his liberty. He had observed the only object in the room that would serve as a weapon of defense. It was the spiral spring detached from the door, and it was heavy enough to be used as a missile or weapon. He backed to the wall, raised the spring menacingly, and defied his foes to advance.

The desperado, at Florine's command, glided directly to where the detective stood. He had dropped his knife, and drawing a revolver, directed it at Falcon's head. His intended victim dodged aside, affording Florine her opportunity to act. So suddenly did her hands grasp the detective that he was borne backward over the open doorway, and felt that her agility had exceeded that of her ally in its execution.

He extended his hand as he whirled downward; it grasped the outer edge of the door; he clung there as tenaciously as his slipping fingers would admit, and sought to raise his other hand to pull himself over the edge and again confront his foes.

Florine darted forward as she saw his predicament; her hands tore at his fingers with tigerish ferocity. At the same moment her accomplice fired a second time, and with a tragic suddenness the detective relaxed his hold; and as he disappeared from view, the triumphant words rung from Florine's lips:

"That ends Falcon, the detective!"

CHAPTER XVI.

BAFFLED.

FOR a moment or two the evil-hearted Florine gazed out upon the dark void before her, then she withdrew from the window and the apartment.

She believed fully that the fall would kill Falcon, yet she had scarcely disappeared when a suspicious sound echoed from directly beneath the door from which the detective had dropped. A jangling noise was succeeded by a scraping one, and the man whose fate her cruel mind had fully settled was revealed.

A peculiar accident and the exertion of rare presence of mind had combined to favor Falcon in a startling escape from a horrible death. When his one clutching hand was grasped by Florine, he foresaw the futility

of opposing her, and relaxed his grasp, not, however, as she supposed to be precipitated below, but to drop less than five feet to a position of comparative safety.

Falcon had retained possession of the steel spring, and a brilliant idea had suggested itself to his mind. He had caught the crooked end of the spring in an iron projection near the opening, and clutching tightly the other extremity, had relied on the strong spiral coil to sustain his weight. Thus he dropped out of view for several feet, his body swaying up and down violently. He augmented the motion until to his satisfaction his hand touched a receding course of brickwork for which he abandoned the spring entirely.

He clung tenaciously to his frail perch and tried to pierce the darkness. He found that a wing of the building was located only a few yards distant, and he began to work his way hand over hand toward its roof. He gained a firm foothold at last, and breathless and almost exhausted rested on the sloping roof of the structure, marveling at his own fortuitous escape from Florine's toils and wondering what had become of his friend, Ellis Searle.

He started as a low roaring sound reached his hearing, for it recalled to his mind the triumphant words of La Belle Florine when she announced Ellis Searle's death by the water-wheel. The detective clambered over the roof, reached its end, and looking down saw a huge wheel turning from the action of the river below.

"Great heavens!" he gasped out as his horrified eyes, after watching a dozen revolutions of the ponderous wheel, made out dimly a human form stretched across two arms of the same. "The fiends have consigned Searle to a horrible fate. Be it life or death, I will attempt his rescue."

He made a flying leap as that portion of the wheel containing the form of Ellis Searle, as he supposed, came directly beneath him. He landed with a shock upon the timbers, saw his worst suspicions verified, and then as his hands clutched at the object before him, he found Ellis Searle secured by ropes, insensible or dead.

The wheel drove them through the water and revolved several times before Falcon succeeded in untying his friend. Then, just as a bright glare illumined the scene, the detective dropped into the water, his unconscious friend in his arms, and drifted down the stream and to the opposite shore.

The mill had been fired to destroy all traces of the infamous work of Florine and her accomplices. For over an hour Falcon watched Ellis Searle, and welcomed his return to life with unfeigned emotion. In graphic language he told of the episodes of the past few hours, and terminated his recital with the words:

"You now understand the plans of the woman Florine?"

"To make justice believe Myrtle Winthrop is her murdered sister."

"Exactly."

"Can they succeed?"

"With a plausible story of the resuscitation of the supposed victim, yes."

"Provided Myrtle consents."

"They will force her to their wishes."

"And then?"

"Then Bruce Talbot will be set free or admitted to bail, and the still concealed plots for Elwyn Winthrop's fortune will be carried out."

"And for all this they have schemed?"

"Apparently. Come, everything depends on our tracing them down before they reach Albany."

Both started at a brisk rate of speed from the spot.

"Wayne and Florine believe us dead," remarked Falcon. "We shall reach the city as soon as they and spoil their plans."

They did not return to Belleville. Instead, reaching a little railway station, they questioned its agent, the only occupant of the place. He informed them that the first freight train passed in an hour. It did not carry passengers as a general rule, but they might be accommodated in the rear caboose car, if desirable.

"It is only a few hours' ride," remarked Falcon, and they were speeding over the steel rails before midnight.

The conductor, seated in the lookout, paid

no further attention to them than to collect their fares, while the other train-hands were on duty inside.

Falcon and Searle were busily engaged in discussing their future movements, when the latter started suddenly. He had glanced carelessly out at the rear door, and through its glass top he now stared wildly.

"What is it?" demanded the detective, somewhat astonished as Searle started to his feet.

"A face—one of our enemies. I could swear to it!"

"Nonsense! Imagination. What! You will not be convinced?"

Ellis Searle had glided to the door, opened it, and disappeared on the platform. Falcon paid only an indifferent attention to what he deemed a delusion of the senses; but he too arose quickly as an unmistakable cry of alarm came from the darkness of the platform.

He glided to the door and looked out.

A man, roughly dressed, stood clinging to the iron railing, his sinister eyes burning into the darkness behind. Ellis Searle had mysteriously disappeared.

As the light from the interior of the car revealed the stranger fully to the detective, he recognized him as the man who had fired at him in the mill at the bidding of La Belle Florine.

In a flash Falcon comprehended the situation. This man was a lurking emissary of the plotters who had shadowed their footsteps after their escape by the river, and Ellis Searle, in verifying his suspicions as to the presence of some one on the platform, had undoubtedly lost his life. A conflict with this man had probably resulted in his being flung from the rushing train.

The detective's eyes blazed with rage as he realized the murderous ruffianism of this accomplice of Wayne, and he drew a revolver quickly.

The man turned at that moment. With an ejaculation of alarm he raised his hand, holding a broad iron bar, which he had probably employed to silence Ellis Searle.

The detective fired.

The ruffian's shoulder met the muzzle of the revolver, the bullet flattening against it and driving the bar from his hand. The concussion and flash half-stunned and blinded the detective and he staggered slightly. The desperado, quick to perceive his advantage, sprung forward, wounded as he was, and Falcon, taken off his guard, felt his muscular hand seize his form. The train just passing a high bridge, was still preserving a rapid rate of speed. Falcon stumbled and fell.

"Die!"

The word hissed vengefully in his ear. Falcon felt himself strike a girder of the bridge. A vision of black desolation swept his senses, and flung with terrific velocity from the on-rushing train, he whirled down through the darkness of the night to an inky void below.

It was a terrible fall aside from the revolving impetus of the descent. The detective seemed to strike water, then life became a blank. When consciousness revived, he was dazed and weak. He appeared to have sustained no serious injuries, yet he was aching in every limb.

He found himself lying on the shore of a little island in the river. A few hundred yards distant was the high railroad bridge from which he had fallen. Evidently the shock of contact with the water had deprived him of consciousness and he had floated to this spot.

The sun was high in the heavens. He must have been lying there for hours.

"Foiled!" gasped out Falcon wildly. "By this time Wayne's scheme has been placed in execution," yet hoping that all might not yet be lost, he forded the stream to the main shore, reached the railroad track and started back for the nearest station. Bruised and aching, he dropped to a seat as he gained a little depot, but he started joyfully as he recognized a figure standing at the window of the place.

"Ellis Searle!" he cried, as he sprung forward.

It was indeed his friend, who welcomed him excitedly, telling him of his fall to the side of the track, of a bad sprain in one arm, of unconsciousness and his final restoration to life an hour previous. Searle in turn

listened to the detective's recital suspensefully.

"Then I was right in my surmise?" he remarked.

"What surmise?"

"That our enemies intend to prevent our reaching Albany."

"And you have acted on that presumption?"

"I have."

"In what way?"

"I hastened here. I sent a telegram to the chief of police at Albany."

Falcon uttered a pleased ejaculation.

"Telling him," continued Searle, "to hold Talbot a prisoner at all hazards."

"Good!"

"I signed your name and hinted at a plot on the part of Talbot's friends to defeat justice."

The detective's face showed his approbation of Searle's course.

"And now?" he asked.

"I am waiting for a reply."

It seemed to have arrived at that moment, for the telegraph operator called Searle to the window.

He handed him a hastily-penciled message he had evidently just taken from the wires.

Falcon saw Searle's face pale visibly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"All is ended—our case is lost!" was the ominous reply.

"What mean you?"

"Read!"

A deepening frown of dismay shadowed Falcon's brow as he perused the telegram signed by the Albany chief of police. It ran:

"Bruce Talbot, accused of murder, was released from custody this morning, his wife, supposed to have been his victim, having reappeared."

CHAPTER XVII.

A DESPERATE GAME.

"HERE is the place."

Falcon spoke the words as he stood in a little yard attached to a series of low, rambling structures. Himself and Searle had reached Albany two hours before, and with persistent determination had decided to pursue the trail so nearly broken.

Arrived at Albany, a short investigation had proven the entire success of Rodney Wayne's plans. Early that morning, the detective learned, a woman, pale and apparently ill, had been driven to the office of the prosecuting attorney, accompanied by a man who was undoubtedly Rodney Wayne.

The latter had succeeded in imposing his companion upon the attorney as the supposed dead Eunice Winthrop. A plausible story of resuscitation had deceived justice. Bruce Talbot had been released on bail, there being no serious charge left to prosecute.

Ellis Searle was amazed at Myrtle's compliance in the scheme.

"She was probably drugged, terrorized, by her foes," explained Falcon, and then he started forthwith on the trail of the plotters.

The case had arrived at a vital stage. Myrtle Winthrop had been threatened into personating her murdered sister. The conspirators, free, had the secrets of the Winthrop fortune and the heiress to its wealth in their power.

Once disappeared, their recapture would be a hopeless task, yet at nightfall Falcon had led Searle to a low portion of the city, scaled an alleyway fence, and had said:

"Yonder is the house to which Bruce Talbot was brought this morning."

"Then our enemies are there, Myrtle, too?"

"I do not know. That we must learn."

The detective briefly outlined the case to his companion. A dozen elements were in play, and all must be grasped coherently, he said. The secret of the fortune must be wrested from the villains ere they proceeded to put their plans into execution. The compromising papers against Searle's uncle must be found, Bruce Talbot re-arrested, Myrtle Winthrop rescued, and La Belle Florine brought to justice. A deadly glitter shone in Falcon's eyes as he spoke the woman's name. A latent, vengeful thought of his murdered friend, the brave detective, Kepler, appeared to influence him to progress under the most adverse circumstances.

The place they had gained showed a door leading into the lower story of the frame building. Falcon explained to his companion that it was a choice residence for criminals, and he bade Searle wait while he disappeared within the place only to reappear with excited features a moment later.

"What have you discovered?" Searle asked eagerly.

"Myrtle is not there."

A hopeless groan escaped Searle's lips.

"But La Belle Florine and Wayne are. They, at least, shall not escape us."

"You have located them?"

"Yes, in the act of leaving."

"For where?"

"New York city. Follow me cautiously. They shall both be arrested within ten minutes."

The detective led the way into the building and as they reached a flight of stairs, he pointed across a hall to a window. Through its upper uncurtained half Searle could discern two persons. They were Florine and Wayne.

The woman wore a heavy veil, and was just closing a sachel.

Falcon glided to the window and peered through. His hand on the sash, he listened.

Wayne was speaking, and his words were plainly audible.

"Then it is settled," he was saying. "You seek obscurity and await the fortune."

"Exactly," the woman replied. "I have done my part, and so skillfully masked and veiled that not one of our accomplices would recognize me later—but Myrtle Winthrop?"

Wayne's eyes gleamed with a sinister glow.

"I will take care of her," he remarked.

"Of what use is she now?"

"Never mind that. We may use her as a menace to our enemies."

"They are disposed of—"

"Well, well," interrupted Wayne, impatiently. "It would be folly to set her free."

"Kill her, then."

Ellis Searle shuddered at the woman's repellent cruelty. The detective brought his lips close to his face.

"One question," he whispered, impressively. "You believe yonder woman to be the murderess of your uncle?"

"I do."

"And if you saw her face you could tell?"

"Yes."

"Once identify her as the assassin, and we have a power over her that will avenge the crime and compel her to tell all. Cover them both with your revolver."

The detective suddenly seized their sash. It went up with a shock as he sprung into full view of Wayne who had just taken up the sachel. The latter turned, wildly alarmed, and Florine fell back with a quick ejaculation of terror.

"Lost!" she gasped out. "It is Falcon."

The detective had extended a revolver, covering the two plotters. They seemed to discern their peril readily. Wayne, pale and startled, stood transfixed.

"Rodney Wayne," came impressively, hoarsely, from Falcon's lips, "move, and you are a dead man."

As he spoke, the detective's companion also appeared at the window.

"Two of them, and that one?" gasped out the woman.

"Is Ellis Searle. The game is up," cried Wayne.

The detective began to climb through the window. Searle's revolver covered the plotters, and they dared not move. Falcon kept his eye upon them.

A glare that was demoniac in its expression issued from Rodney Wayne's eyes. Defeat was stamped upon his evil features, but it was mingled with a crafty, cowardly light.

"I will foil them yet," he muttered hoarsely.

He stepped quickly to Florine's side. Falcon saw his hand describe a rapid movement. It seemed to touch the woman's face under the veil, and the glitter of some bright object accompanied it. At the same moment, Florine started and uttered a sharp ejaculation of pain.

"Silence!" whispered Wayne, hoarsely.

"Keep up your courage. I shall baffle that cursed detective yet."

Falcon had advanced into the room.

"Rodney Wayne," he said ominously, "we have arrived just in time."

Wayne was silent.

"The first act in the winding up of your clever game takes place in this room. Searle!" His companion climbed through the window.

"I will unmask yonder woman."

La Belle Florine, as if seized with sudden faintness, sunk to a chair, but she hissed out:

"You shall not!"

"We shall see," replied Falcon, as he advanced to where the woman sat, but Wayne stepped before the detective.

"Wait," he said quickly.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Falcon.

"A moment's conversation with you. Are we under arrest?"

"Yes."

"On what charge?"

"Can you ask? I charge yonder woman, first, with the murder of Anson Drexel."

"You have no proofs."

"I have. Ellis Searle, you could identify the woman who murdered your uncle—"

"I could."

"Then we will end this trifling. We are wasting time. When yourself and your guilty accomplice are in prison, Rodney Wayne, we will end Bruce Talbot's evil scheme."

Wayne started wildly.

"He knows all," he muttered. "Oh, if the men would only come!"

"To identify your companion, La Belle Florine, as a murderess, is to furnish the key to your every scheme. La Belle Florine, with the shadow of the gallows over your guilty soul, you will cling to the hope of a respite by revealing all."

"She never will!" ground out Wayne. "Ha!"

Florine had fallen suddenly from the chair. A desperate light shone in Wayne's eyes. The detective sprung forward, and seized the woman's vail.

"She has fainted," he said. "Ah! La Belle Florine, murderer of my beloved friend, I tear the mask from your false face. Ellis Searle, is this the woman who shot down your uncle?"

He had expected an affirmative reply, but it did not come.

The mystery of Rodney Wayne's actions was revealed, his cruel, treacherous game was discovered.

He had sacrificed his accomplice to save himself.

"Falcon, you are foiled at the last. This woman will never serve your designs."

A cry of horror escaped the detective's lips as the vail fell from the woman's face.

"You shall answer to justice for this crime," cried the detective.

For that crime, if such it was, had deluded justice and defeated all Falcon's designs. With infernal recklessness, to save La Belle Florine from the gallows, Rodney Wayne had forever destroyed her dark, flashing beauty.

Some subtle acid from a vial in his hand flung into the woman's face, when he had pretended to whisper to her, had driven her to insensibility, and piercing the tender flesh, even to the eyes, had blackened and corroded the countenance to a veritable death's mask.

Ellis Searle could never recognize in that mockery of life in death the murderess of his uncle. The low, incoherent moanings that began to break from Florine's lips, told Falcon that a wandering mind would succeed the hellish experiment of the unprincipled Wayne.

With a wild cry of rage the detective sprung toward Wayne.

"You scoundrel!" he cried. "For this act of cruelty, if no more, you shall fill a felon's cell."

"Never! Stand back! A hundred deaths stare you in the face."

Rodney Wayne had taken up a flat box from the floor. With the rapidity of light, he turned a catch in it. There was a low, whirring sound, ominously suggestive of some infernal machine, to Falcon's practiced ear.

Ere he could intercept Rodney Wayne's reckless hand, the latter had flung the box with a crash against the lamp. It overturned and extinguished it.

There was one moment of weird, solemn silence, one brief interval of darkness and suspense.

Then a mighty explosion sounded through the building, a flash like electric light showed the walls upheaved and falling, and amid the wreck and chaos Falcon the detective, and Ellis Searle were flung through space with the velocity of a cannon-ball.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SHADOWED.

Two days after the disfigurement of La Belle Florine and the temporary rout of the detective, Falcon, in the thieves' den at Albany, the active elements in the game under play were transferred to a low drinking saloon for seafaring men located on the East river in New York city.

It was a dark, cloudy afternoon, and the dive referred to wore its worst aspect as a slouching, apparently half-drunken sailor staggered into the place, ordered a drink, and having dispatched it withdrew himself to the darkest corner of the bar proper, and tilting his chair back against the wall appeared to nod drowsily.

His position, however, had he selected it purposely to survey all that might transpire in the place, could not have been better chosen, for he had a perfect view of the front entrance, and by glancing sideways could peer through a broad crack in the rear partition behind which was located the private drinking-room of the establishment. As the new-comer's glance rested on two men, seated at a table behind that partition, he started interestedly, and then bending his ear, seemed immersed in listening to what they were saying.

"Why don't the man come? he promised to be on hand at four o'clock," spoke one of the twain, and as he lifted his head impatiently from behind a long false beard the features of Rodney Wayne peered out clearly. "I say, Smith, I feel uneasy."

"Why?" questioned his *vis-a-vis*.

"Because we are at sea about the Albany escapade."

"Was not the building shattered and the inmates probably killed?" demanded Smith.

"Perhaps so and perhaps not. If I escaped, why may not Falcon and the others have done the same?"

"Because they were not familiar with the place. No, Wayne, when you and Talbot and the girl Winthrop ran for New York, I shadowed the old den, and I honestly believe Falcon, Searle and Florine are a mass of charred cinders in the ruins—"

"I hope so," heartlessly interrupted Wayne, "for the least break in our plans now means the loss of a royal fortune. The girl is caged and quiet at the house near the boat, and Talbot is on board the yacht ready to sail. When this man you engaged the boat from—what's his name?"

"Fuertado."

"Yes, the Brazilian smuggler, Fuertado, comes here, I will close the deal, get him to secure a diver."

Smith started violently.

"A what?"

"A diver. Oh! I forgot, you don't know the details of this fortune. Well, it's hidden in a place, where no ordinary man can reach it, and we want to go prepared for prompt and effective action. Ha! here is our man. Leave me alone with him, Smith."

The man tilted back against the partition, his chin bent on his chest in feigned slumber, glanced keenly from beneath his bent brows at the new-comer on the scene—a dark-visaged foreigner who had entered the saloon and come directly to the rear apartment.

"Ah, my good friend Wayne, you are here," he spoke in a broken accent; "well, we are ready to close the affair."

Fuertado, if it was he, slipped into Smith's seat, and his little bead-like eyes sparkled avariciously as Wayne removed a large wallet from his pocket.

"Yes," responded the latter. "The yacht suits me, and although it seems to bear a bad reputation as a smuggling craft, it will answer my purpose. Here is your money, five hundred dollars, and a like sum thirty days from date on my return."

"From Florida, I believe you said," insinuated Fuertado, as he pocketed the money.

"Yes; we sail in the morning early. By the way, I need another hand."

"There are a hundred able sailors on the docks to choose from."

"No, no; I want an expert in a certain line—a diver—a man trustworthy, dauntless, but not so keen as to swindle me."

"You must be going for a hidden treasure?" suggested Fuertado, curiously.

"Maybe. That's my affair. I want a man who can live in the water if necessary, and who can dodge and carve a shark or an alligator as coolly as he would cut an enemy who should cross his path."

Fuertado looked intensely curious, but seeing no token of confidence in Wayne's cold glance, he said with a shrug of the shoulders:

"I can find the man you want, I think, but it may cost something. There are scores of Malays or Hindoos—"

"Well, well; get me my man by midnight, irrespective of cost, and send him to the boat, or the house near it. I can rely on you?"

"Perfectly, and whisper, my good friend, Wayne, since I slipped a noted embezzler down the coast to Cuba a few weeks since, the officers have spotted the yacht. Its usefulness in that direction is impaired, but the underwriters still take it as a risk. If it should accidentally catch afire on the Florida coast, I would not feel very badly, solaced with double insurance on the empty boxes you will find in the hold."

Fuertado winked slyly, and left Wayne with a parting nod. The latter and Smith became engrossed in a confidential conversation as Fuertado passed into the outer bar-room, and the silent watcher at the other side of the partition arose to his feet.

"Wayne and Smith, and their friend Fuertado, are safe for a few hours," he muttered, softly. "Fuertado is the man to work, for the present."

The shambling, unsteady gait and nautical attire that dogged the Brazilian's footsteps were those of the sailor, but the voice was undoubtedly that of Falcon, the detective. He had not perished in the explosion and fire at Albany, as his enemies believed and hoped. He had been flung from the window by the concussion, had fallen insensible in the court below, and with recovered consciousness, adjudged La Belle Florine and Ellis Searle victims to Wayne's desperate act, and had started on the trail of the miscreant, and, as has been seen, struck it successfully.

Fuertado, after leaving the saloon, visited several sailors' boarding-houses, inquiring for Malays who might have come in with foreign ships. Falcon shadowed him closely, located his residence, and then hastened to his own home.

When he reappeared on the scene of action it was in the most perfect disguise he had ever assumed, and was actuated by an impulse that warned him to exercise more than ordinary caution and shrewdness.

When Fuertado's yacht left New York, it would have on board the men he wanted. He could arrest them and rescue Myrtle at once, but in so doing he would forever close Rodney Wayne's lips as to the hidden fortune of Elwyn Winthrop.

To successfully terminate the case, it was requisite that he should follow these conspirators until their plans were fully accomplished, and he determined to do so, even at the loss of time and the cost of unusual peril.

An hour later a man, tawny-skinned and wearing a long, unkempt mass of coarse black hair, knocked at the door of the little shipping-office where Fuertado made his head-quarters.

It was Falcon, the detective, whose entire make-up well accorded with the character he intended to assume.

He had no trouble in convincing Fuertado that having heard that he was making inquiries for an expert diver, he desired to secure the position. Fuertado questioned him closely, and then gave him directions as to his future employer, a man named Wayne he said, to whom he directed him, at a yacht lying at a pier near by.

It was dark when the disguised detective reached the pier indicated. Anchored away from the docks in mid-stream was the yacht. A solitary figure patrolled its deck. Falcon hailed him and inquired for Wayne. The

other responded in cautious, suspicious tone and directed the detective to a gloomy-looking house about a square away.

Falcon reached the house indicated and ascended its unlighted staircase. A light shone through the transom of a room on the second floor, and thither the detective directed his footsteps. As the sound of a voice he recognized as that of Wayne greeted his hearing, he paused.

There was a vacant room directly across the hall from that occupied by Wayne, and stepping into this, the detective climbed upon a bench near the door, and lifted himself to the level of the transom. His glance was riveted on the interior of the apartment beyond, and he decided to watch and listen for a few moments ere he ventured to approach Wayne.

Upon a couch, with pale face and distracted eyes, sat Myrtle Winthrop. Standing in the center of the apartment was Smith, and by his side Rodney Wayne. The pose of the trio told of a stormy scene just ended or an exciting one at that moment inaugurated.

But not upon the faces of the three actors was the glance of Falcon long fixed. His eye, wandering around the apartment, had rested on the half-open door of a closet communicating with the hall and the room. Pressing against it, pale, watchful, determined, was a human face, at the sight of which the detective with difficulty restrained an impulsive ejaculation of amazement.

For the fourth and hidden occupant of the room was no other than Ellis Searle.

Falcon forgot his disguise as a diver, forgot his mission hither, all, save that unforeseen circumstances seemed about to herald a tragic episode within the next few moments.

Then placing his revolver ready for instant use if required, he prepared to listen and act on what he believed would prove some remarkably exciting disclosures.

CHAPTER XIX.

ON THE YACHT.

MYRTLE WINTHROP started suddenly to her feet as the detective gazed, and, shrinking back from Rodney Wayne's bold, menacing glance, looked wildly around as if seeking some avenue of escape.

Then, as she seemed to realize that she was no match for two powerful captors, she sunk again to the couch, covering her face with her hands, and sobbing violently.

"Yes, you are still in my power, if you insist in putting it that way," spoke Wayne, coldly. "As to my promise that after you appeared at Albany you should go free, that is now impossible. In all I have done I have been actuated by a desire to benefit you."

The beautiful girl looked up suddenly.

"It is untrue," she cried. "I read in your bold, bad face, the scheming triumph of a villain. Oh, that I had resisted the drugs you forced me to take, and had not gone through that scene before the officers of the court! Man, man, if you have a heart, tell me why you have thus separated me from my friends—explain the mystery of my personating my sister at Albany? Where is that sister—where my husband?"

Rodney Wayne affected a sad, ominous bearing.

"Your sister you have saved by obeying me, as I shall convince you later. Your husband you must forget. He is unworthy of you, for he is a criminal, an assassin."

"It is a cruel falsehood!" interrupted Myrtle Winthrop excitedly. "For some deep design of your own, you seek to poison my mind against him."

"Would you be convinced? Then read."

Rodney Wayne had suddenly drawn a folded paper from his pocket, evidently prepared for the occasion. His finger indicated an article detailing the mysterious affair at Lawndale. As the trembling hands of Myrtle Winthrop seized the newspaper, and she perused the article that verified the words of her captor, her face grew ashen.

"Oh, it cannot be!" she moaned. "My husband, my Ellis guilty of that terrible crime? Oh, merciful heavens! what is this?"

Her eye had fallen to a second article it had not been the intention of the villain to display to her. The paper had become unfolded and her intense gaze was fixed upon a statement of the fact that Eunice Winthrop

who was supposed to have been murdered at Albany by Bruce Talbot had reappeared, and the supposed murderer had been released.

Rodney Wayne tore the paper from her grasp as he realized what she was doing.

"Confusion!" he muttered, "she will suspect the truth."

"Villain! assassin!" cried Myrtle, springing to her feet. "I have fathomed your evil schemes at last. My sister is dead, and I have been used to liberate her murderer. Stand back, or I will shriek for help!"

"Silence!" ground out Wayne menacingly. "If your resemblance to your sister has been employed by me to secure the liberty of her husband, it was to carry out the directions of your father, the parent you have not seen since childhood. I act as his agent, and you must, you shall obey me. Your husband will die on the gallows, and the sooner you forget him the better."

"A lie! her husband is here to protect the wife he loves, an innocent man come to avenge the base murder of a relative, which lies at your door, Rodney Wayne! Stand where you are, or you are a dead man!"

The detective, Falcon, started violently as Searle sprang suddenly into view. The latter extended a revolver straight at the amazed Wayne's heart, his eyes flashing fire, his pale face filled with mingled rage and hatred for the scoundrel who had so mercilessly persecuted the innocent Myrtle Winthrop.

As to the latter, she uttered a wild cry of emotion, and then, overcome by the excitement of the moment, sunk fainting to the floor.

"The trap!"

Rodney Wayne uttered the words in a quivering undertone to Smith. The latter had glided stealthily toward the wall.

His hand described a quick movement and seemed to touch a knob sunk in the woodwork of the door. There was a click. Falcon uttered a cry of horror as Ellis Searle disappeared from view, a section of the floor opening suddenly at his feet.

"Settled for sure this time!" fairly yelled Wayne. "Quick, Smith, we must trifle no longer. This man escaped us at Albany, and Falcon is twice as keen as he. Lift the girl, and hasten to the boat."

The watching detective, filled with a dreadful apprehension for the fate of his friend, did not delay to interfere with the plans of the two schemers. He had gained the ground floor of the building before Wayne or Smith had left the room in which lay the insensible Myrtle Winthrop, and after some little difficulty had forced a door leading to the cellar. A lighted match afforded Falcon a desultory survey of the cellar. A wooden shaft in one corner attracted his attention, and as he sprang toward it, he heard unmistakably the sounds as of some one floundering about in water.

The detective's quick brain readily seized the situation. The wooden shaft led from the room in which the conspirators were from the trap and undoubtedly terminated in an inclosed well or pit filled with water. Falcon ignited another match, found a hatchet among a lot of debris, and in a moment's time, pried from their places several boards of the shaft.

He called a single name, low and cautiously, as he leaned over the edge of the pit beyond:

"Searle!"

A glad, half-choked cry gasped his own name in reply, and as Falcon lowered one of the boards, it was seized, and a second later Ellis Searle came into view dripping and almost exhausted.

In a brief, rapid manner Falcon detailed the situation of affairs. He listened to Searle's hurried account of a hair's-breadth escape from the den at Albany, but said, as he heard footsteps descending the stairs to the main floor overhead:

"Linger about the vicinity of the wharf. If the yacht does not sail until midnight, I will make it a point to see you. For the present, I must gain Rodney Wayne's confidence by carrying out my imposture. Do not betray yourself by any undue anxiety for your wife. She shall be safely guarded."

"But you will let these villains carry her away from the city!" cried Searle, suspensefully

"To save a fortune and end this case successfully—yes," was Falcon's parting words, as he left Searle's side and ascended to the street.

He saw, about a square ahead and hastening toward the river, the two men he had left in the room above. They bore between them the insensible form of Myrtle Winthrop.

Falcon shadowed them until they reached the pier, where Wayne uttered a shrill whistle, and a minute later a little yawl put out from the side of the yacht moored in mid-stream.

Smith had lifted Myrtle into the boat, and Wayne was about to step in after him, when Falcon, throwing his best powers of dissimulation into his part, touched him on the shoulder.

The latter started and eyed him suspiciously; then, as his glance traversed the tawny face and unusual costume of the other, he asked:

"What do you want?"

"You are Mr. Wayne?" inquired the pretended Malay, with a foreign accent.

"Yes."

"Mr. Fuertado sent me to you. I am a diver."

"Ha! I understand. Jump into the boat. It's all right, Smith—the diver from our Brazilian friend."

Falcon remained silently in the stern until they reached the deck of the yacht. Wayne greeted a muffled form Falcon believed to be Bruce Talbot, and ordered Smith to convey his insensible charge to the cabin. He gave some rapid orders to the man who had rowed them to the yacht, and the silent but watchful detective for the next half-hour witnessed evident preparations to start the yacht on its voyage.

Falcon was aroused from a close scrutiny of the pier, whence a lurking form much resembling Ellis Searle had just disappeared, by Wayne approaching him.

The latter, fixing a penetrating glance on the pretended Malay, said:

"You say Fuertado sent you here? You are a diver—an expert?"

"Men say so, sahib," replied Falcon, with becoming humility.

"You understand that I require your services for no child's play? It means endurance and rapidity in the water, and possibly hard battles with marine monsters."

"Such as alligators and sharks," insinuated Falcon.

"Exactly. Stop! what are you doing?"

Falcon suddenly seized a dozen or more cork life-preservers, tied together and lying on the deck. He startled Wayne by flinging them into the water, and then, tearing off the cloak and superfluous garments he wore, revealed himself, brown as a Malay, covered only by a light swimming costume.

The next moment he sprang to the rail, drew a long, crooked dirk from his sash, waved it ferociously, and then, with a barbaric yell, dived head downward into the water.

For a moment Wayne was taken off his guard; then he recovered himself, realizing that the diver was giving him a sample of his ability. Never was a fish more at home in its native element than the expert Falcon. The guide reflector-lamp from the pier blazoned the water like a ray of moonlight, and illuminated the confined arena where the detective was giving a test of his proficiency.

So long was Falcon gone under the surface that Wayne began to be alarmed. Suddenly the diver reappeared ten lengths from where he had gone down. Curveting, backing, floating, treading, he played around the buoyant bundle of life-preservers, his knife between his teeth, indicating that the parcel played the part of a shark that he was attacking.

He imitated every deft maneuver of an expert shark-killer, darting his knife hither and thither, astounding the admiring Wayne with a dozen prodigious springs and dives, and then, tossing the bundle on deck, followed it promptly.

"You'll do," remarked Wayne enthusiastically, "and listen, my man, the pay won't make us quarrel. Here, Smith, give this man his quarters and get ready to slip the cable."

The preparations to carry out Wayne's

orders consumed nearly an hour. Just as they were ready, a yawl shot out from the wharf, containing one oarsman and a muffled whiskered man carrying a sachel. The latter as the yawl reached the yacht clambered aboard, waved the waterman to shore again, and handed a folded note to Wayne.

The brow of the plotter clouded as he perused it, but he said gruffly to the newcomer:

"Go below to the cabin. I'll talk with you as soon as we get to sea."

"What is it?" asked Smith, who had noticed the episode.

"A defaulting cashier I guess, for Fuertado insists on my making room for him. All ready?"

"Yes."

Falcon, from a convenient pile of ropes, kept his eyes wide open, and noticed every occurrence of interest. Smith and two sailors were getting the cable free, when a new interruption startled Wayne.

From the darkness of the docks a boat had reached the yacht unperceived by Wayne, for he started visibly and could not resist an ejaculation of profound amazement, as a veiled form clambered boldly over the side of the ship. For fully a minute he stared pale and transfixed at this new intruder.

"Who are you?" he finally demanded, in a hoarse tone of alarm.

A bitter, mocking laugh from behind the veil accompanied the words.

"I guess you can imagine without seeing the evidence of your treacherous work, Rodney Wayne."

"Florine!" fell in a shuddering gasp from Wayne's pallid lips.

"Yes, Rodney Wayne," spoke the woman in a cold, hard tone that thrilled the listening Falcon, "but that your infernal sacrifice of my beauty was meant to save me from the gallows, I would kill you where you stand. Enough to know that I am here, mistress of the situation, and you, my servant in the game you are playing, or—"

She paused ominously.

"Or what?" demanded Wayne, scowling malignantly.

The woman lifted a handkerchief. The boatman at the side of the yacht rowed slowly toward the shore at the signal.

"Or ruin to your every plan. In ten minutes this boat leaves for Florida, the girl on board, the secret of the hidden wealth I secured in your possession. Am I right?"

"You are," affirmed Wayne.

"That document of the secret I foolishly trusted to you I must have before you sail. Your promise to wed the wreck of beauty your selfishness made must be mine likewise. Speak! is it a bargain?"

A rageful, chagrined expression crossed Wayne's villainous face.

"Do you take me for a fool?" he demanded angrily.

"Your decision!" spoke the woman calmly, steadily. "You refuse?"

"And if I do?"

"Then I drop this handkerchief I hold, and in half an hour a trusty ally will convey to the police all the truth of our plot. I will not be defrauded of my reward, I have suffered too much. Your answer, now, at once!"

A muffled oath rent Rodney Wayne's lips. Then he drew a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to the woman.

He assumed a careless laugh as he said between his set teeth:

"Have your own way. I never intended to defraud you of your share of the fortune. You shall direct and control this enterprise, and I will make you my wife when our plans are perfected."

He turned to give some orders to Smith, and the yacht swung into the river.

"Wayne, Talbot and La Belle Florine aboard," murmured Falcon under his breath, as the woman walked toward the cabin. "All the elements are in play, and I, skillfully disguised, at an advantage to work them to my benefit. Good! My lady Florine, before this voyage ends, the document Rodney Wayne just gave you—the secret of Elwyn Winthrop's hidden wealth, must be mine!"

CHAPTER XX.

STARTLING ADVENTURES.

In the darkness of the midnight hour the

yacht containing Falcon, the detective, and the people he had determined to watch sailed out of New York harbor.

The nature of the veteran officer did not usually admit of slow patient work, but in the present instance he resolved to calmly abide the issues of time and act definitely only when the proper moment arrived.

"The game is in my hands," he soliloquized placidly, "the final rescue of Myrtle Winthrop certain, and the arrest of these people and the revelation of their secrets a matter of course."

So, while the little craft sped southward on its mission of mystery, Falcon gave himself over to the indolence of leisure. There was nothing to gain by exciting suspicion by continually watching his enemies, as their plans were plainly outlined, although certain papers and secrets they held, Falcon determined to become possessed of ere the voyage was ended.

The weather was stormy and overcast for days after leaving port, and Falcon saw very little of the people on board except Rodney Wayne and the men in charge of the boat. La Belle Florine evidently had made a satisfactory arrangement with Wayne, for whenever the detective managed to peer into the main cabin, he saw herself, the disguised Bruce Talbot, Smith and Wayne on the friendliest terms. Adjoining their cabin was one in which he knew Myrtle Winthrop was confined a close prisoner.

The mysterious embezzler Fuertado had sent at the last moment of the departure of the yacht, paid no attention to any one, but smoked and lounged in the forward cabin all the time. Once, Falcon watching the man narrowly, imagined that the latter made a peculiar movement of partial recognition, but Rodney Wayne coming up, the stranger lounged carelessly away.

So the time passed uneventfully by, until one bright, moonlit evening, the sails were shortened and Florine, Wayne and Talbot engaged in earnest consultation on the deck, dropped several hints on Falcon's hearing that revealed to him the fact that they were skirting the Florida coast, and very near their intended destination.

Indeed, he heard Wayne direct the captain to keep land in sight, and look out for a river on the chart named the Chicopee. Florine meantime consulted a time-worn paper Falcon had seen before. It was one of the documents she had wrenched from the hand of the skeleton in the vault of the Drexel mansion, the clew to Elwyn Winthrop's hidden wealth.

"The river leads into a swamp," she was saying, "and it must be near the coast," and then the voices of the conspirators sunk so low that Falcon repaired to the half-state-room, half-larder, that had been apportioned him.

The detective aroused all his energy lying dormant during the uneventful voyage, as he realized that speedy action on the part of his enemies must soon ensue. As he found himself in a position at last to investigate below deck uninterruptedly, he forced a door at the end of his state-room, and gaining a little passageway leading to the hold, peered through a small window used for ventilation, which commanded a view of the main cabin.

The detective started violently as he glanced within the apartment. A light burned low, but its rays showed the door leading into the prison-room of Myrtle Winthrop wide open, and its occupant, just crossing its threshold, hastening to the extended arms of a man who spoke her name low but fervently.

"Myrtle! at last!" were the accents borne to the amazed detective's ear. "For Heaven's sake be cautious and follow my directions!"

"Your note told me we might escape," quavered the pale and excited Myrtle Winthrop.

"Yes; our enemies are on the other side of the deck. We can steal to the little yawl in the rear. Then my trusty arm will defend you to the death if we are discovered."

Falcon was intensely startled, for the man to whom Myrtle Winthrop clung, and who now led her stealthily from the cabin, was no other than Fuertado's embezzler, but the tones of his voice awakened a keen thrill of recognition in the detective's mind.

He feared to hasten to the deck, as he might obstruct or give warning of the escape of the fugitives, and he contented himself by springing to another open ventilator which commanded a full view of the stern of the boat.

He saw the girl and her strange rescuer reach the stern cautiously. Fuertado's embezzling friend lowered the girl into the yawl, untied the rope, and prepared to spring in after her. Then an ejaculation of dismay crossed Falcon's lips.

There was a cry of alarm and hurrying footsteps traversed the deck. Within the detective's scope of vision there suddenly passed Rodney Wayne and Bruce Talbot. Upon his startled hearing fell the words of the former:

"The girl! He is stealing her away. Ha! what treachery is this?"

Wayne drew a revolver, and Talbot grappled with the embezzler. The latter endeavored to strike at him with a knife, but fell as Wayne dealt him a stunning blow with the butt end of his revolver. In the combat, the liberated yawl dropped astern, and with a frantic cry of terror

Myrtle Winthrop was borne away by the tide-swept waves.

The detective intensely excited, was about to hasten to the deck, ready for action, when a new episode enchaind his attention. While Talbot was ordering the captain to direct the course of the yacht in pursuit of the fast-receding yawl, Wayne, leaning over the prostrate form of the embezzler, started back with an excited ejaculation.

"Talbot, quick! look here!"

His companion hastened to his side.

"What is it, Wayne?"

"Look at that man," cried Wayne, as he tore the false bushy beard from the face of the insensible form still clutching the knife in its hand. "The mystery of his appearance is solved at last."

"I do not understand you."

"He is no embezzler. Fuertado's order was a forgery. That man is Ellis Searle, our deadliest enemy."

A vicious snarl broke from Talbot's lips as he sprung forward with drawn knife.

"He must be ended, then, now and here."

"No, not that way," interrupted Wayne calmly, but malignantly. "We leave no clews behind. Search his pockets, and wait."

Wayne left Talbot ransacking the pockets of the insensible Searle. When he returned, he bore a singularly-shaped object made of rubber.

"What is that?" demanded Talbot curiously.

"One of Fuertado's rubber floating-balloons for throwing overboard with smuggled cigars when the revenues press too close. Lift him in, the ends are weighted. He will suffocate and sink like a shot."

Falcon uttered a groan of horror as he saw the men rudely envelop Ellis Searle in the infernal device that was to end his career most effectually.

"I will delay no longer," he muttered fiercely. "I will rescue my friend, at all hazards."

The pretended diver reached the deck in time to stand momentarily overcome with horror. He saw the two fiends, Wayne and Talbot, swing a form incased in the rubber balloon over the rail. With a splash it disappeared. Too late to aid his friend in any way, the detective shrunk to the concealment of a water-barrel, and his eyes flashed with deadly hate and vengeance on these inhuman friends.

Wayne's eyes swept the surface of the sea anxiously, as he believed Ellis Searle effectually disposed of.

"Confound it, the girl has escaped!" Falcon heard him mutter. "Tell the captain to try and find her, while I explain to Florine," he said to Talbot.

The latter obeyed him, and then sat near the binnacle, looking over the various articles he had secured from Ellis Searle's rifled pockets, while Wayne came to the side of Florine who listened excitedly to his recital of what had occurred.

"Let the girl go," she broke out impetuously. "Once landed, this paper will bring us the wealth we have plotted for."

"By heavens, Wayne! This is a double game!"

Falcon, crouched within a few feet of the speakers, recognized a new and exciting complication in the case in hand. Talbot, bearing an open letter evidently found among Searle's effects, had interrupted Wayne and Florine.

"What now?" demanded the latter sharply.

"Treachery, defeat! Your diver is no more a diver than Searle was an embezzler."

"Ha!" ejaculated Wayne with a start.

"This letter was written by Searle, and he intended slipping it to the diver, whom he recognized under his disguise as a friend."

"His name?" queried Florine, hissing.

"Falcon."

Rodney Wayne sprung to his feet pale and excited. The lurking detective set his teeth firmly.

"The game is up," he muttered portentously.

"It's bold and quick work now. Here goes."

With a gliding spring he reached the side of the three conspirators. He had definitely decided on his course, and he acted with a rapidity that fairly paralyzed his enemies.

Snatching the paper La Belle Florine held in her hand he darted across the deck.

"Stop him—the diver—Falcon!" gasped Wayne wildly while Florine shrieked with dismay.

One glance the detective cast at the distant land, one at the water.

Then, as a pistol-shot grazed his head, he thrust into his breast the precious document referring to Elwyn Winthrop's hidden fortune, clasped his hands above his head and dove downward parting the water like a knife and disappearing beneath its surface.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE GUARDIAN OF THE TREASURE.

THREE moonlit, furious faces peered wildly over the rail at the eddying water where Falcon dropped from view. Consumed with hate and chagrin, Rodney Wayne and his two accomplices awaited some indication of the return to the surface, of their deft and deadly foe.

"If he is settled, I, at least, know the secret

by heart," hissed Florine. "If he lives, it is a question of who first reaches Morass Swamp. Ha! see yonder."

As Florine spoke, she pointed a trembling finger at a human head. Falcon, coming to the surface, glanced at the deck, and then at the two little windows in the stern of the boat.

"Hello!" he muttered, as his eyes discerned something at one of the windows that was unobserved by his enemies. "Ellis Searle baffled these demons, after all."

He made a feint to swim toward the yacht. He suddenly changed his course, and dove again as a pair of gleaming revolvers were directed at him. Thus cavorting in the water, grimly baffling his chagrined foes, Falcon displayed all his expertness as a diver and swimmer, electrifying them finally by disappearing beneath the water for so long a time, that, not seeing him come up again, they believed he had gone to the bottom or fallen a prey to some vagrant shark.

What Falcon really did was to swim away from the yacht under water, and then float out of sight. The shore was a mile distant, but he reached it easily during the next hour, and flung himself on the warm, dry sand to rest.

His mind went over the events of the night rapidly, comprehensively. Myrtle Winthrop had found freedom, but in a small yawl at the mercy of the waves. Ellis Searle had escaped. He knew this for, as he glanced at the windows below, he had seen pale and exhausted, lying across the ledge of one of them the very man Wayne had sunk in the rubber balloon.

Falcon theorized that Searle had revived, slit the rubber balloon with his knife, and crept through the window in the stern.

As the conspirators adjudged him dead, they would hasten after the hidden treasure. Falcon arose and scanned the sea, but the yacht was not in sight. He started and uttered an ejaculation of concern, however, as his eyes rested on an overturned boat. It was the yawl of the yacht, and the detective's face was serious as he realized that Myrtle Winthrop might have found a watery grave.

He searched the barren shore for half a mile, but found no trace of the missing girl. Then, with a sigh of genuine sympathy for the unfortunate husband and wife he had sought to befriend, Falcon struck off toward the interior, reached a clump of trees on the borders of a vast marsh, and proceeded to build a fire.

Having dried his clothes before it, the detective seated himself and drew from his pocket the document he had torn from La Belle Florine's grasp on board the yacht, and proceeded to smooth its dampened folds.

His eyes gleamed excitedly despite himself as he began the perusal of the paper. It was time-worn and faded and had evidently been written years before by Elwyn Winthrop. It told briefly of his money transaction with his friend Anson Drexel, of a long trip of speculation through Central America, Mexico and the Southern States, and of the securing of a princely fortune in emeralds, diamonds, gold, and bank of England notes. But his wealth had been coveted by others. Two avaricious Spaniards had followed him, attempted to rob and kill him, and at last driven into a remote portion of Florida, with his faithful black servant, Cuffee, he had hidden the box containing his wealth in a tree-stump in the Alligator Run of Morass Swamp, and had left Cuffee who was lame from a sprain to await his return.

Circumstances forced Elwyn Winthrop, the paper ran, to proceed a long distance ere he threw his pursuers off his trail. Then he decided to go for his two motherless children Myrtle and Eunice at Savannah, take them to New York, reveal his good fortune to his friend and partner Anson Drexel, and return for Cuffee and the treasure.

Here followed an accurate description of the place where the treasure was hidden, and so absorbed in its perusal was Falcon, that he barely looked up when a sound like a moan of despair greeted his hearing.

"Great heavens! what was that?"

Plainly in the flickering light of the fire a dark-robed form seemed fading away before his vision into the darkness beyond, with a pale, agonized face so marvelously like that of Myrtle Winthrop that the detective started violently, but when he hastily traversed the vicinity, he was forced to believe he had suffered a delusion of the senses, for he could find no trace of his supposed mysterious visitant.

His mind restored to its normal calmness, the detective decided on a plain course to locate Morass Swamp. A laborious tramp ensued. He crossed a river, evidently the Chicopee, floundered around in a bog and finally making his way toward a light, which, reached, showed a low negro cabin.

A few brief inquiries directed him over a half-made road toward what was known as the Alligator Run. An hour later Falcon was satisfied that he had reached the very spot where more than a decade since, according to the time-faded document in his possession, Elwyn Winthrop had left his faithful servant to guard his treasure.

There was a small reach of hard peat sloping to a kind of lagoon. In its center was the trunk

of an immense live oak around which even then Falcon could see half a dozen alligators swarming. The air was dark and oppressive, the scene dreary beyond expression. One sign of human habitation alone was visible, a rude hut built of logs on the very edge of the swamp, and through the chinks of which a dim light was visible.

Falcon's experience as a detective had been chiefly metropolitan, but with the elements of the game under play in full view, he did not hesitate to act promptly. He advanced to the door of the cabin, gave a thundering knock on the rude deal door, and awaited developments.

Instantly, a quick commotion sounded in the cabin, the light was extinguished, a clinking metallic sound ensued, and a gruff voice demanded in homely African vernacular:

"Who dar?"

Falcon was quick to jump at conclusions, and generally formed his theories correctly by impulse. He reasoned that the inmate of the lonely cabin must be the guardian of the swamp, possibly the old servant of Elwyn Winthrop himself. In a quiet, impressive tone he replied:

"I am a messenger from the dead, and when I tell you, I know Elwyn Winthrop and you, old Cuffee—"

"Gorry! it's come! Gorry! it's come!"

The old negro's tones broke to an excited, suspenseful quaver. His trembling hands fumbled at the lock, he seemed to put down an old rusty firearm that clattered noisily, and then, as he opened the door and Falcon entered, closing it behind him, he relit the hastily-extinguished candle.

Standing, staring curiously at Falcon, he presented a striking picture. His locks were gray, his form bent with age, but his eyes held all the latent brilliancy of incessant watchfulness and firm decision.

"Ye called me Cuffee. How you know—how you guess?"

Falcon coolly seated himself and leaning across the table, pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," he said. "I have come a thousand miles to see you, old man. You have been a faithful servant. Years ago, your master, Elwyn Winthrop, left you here. Faithful to your trust, you have remained, year after year. Noble Cuffee!"

To Falcon's surprise the negro, instead of seeming flattered, appeared to grow more calm and suspicious.

"Who be ye?" he demanded; "who sent ye here? Ye say ye know Massa Winthrop? Den whar am Massa Winthrop?"

Falcon was satisfied his theory regarding the negro's identity was correct.

"Your master is dead these many years," he said; "and I come to take you and his treasure away."

The negro glared at him.

"Treasure!" he repeated, with affected ignorance. "No, no! Ye're like de rest—tryin' to guess why old Cuffee stay here, a-waitin', a-watchin' for de old marse. No, no! Ye not catch weasel asleep. Go away, or I'll get old musket. Ye tramp! ye scamp! I pore old niggah. I have no treasure. Go!"

He had arisen to his feet in unmistakable aggressiveness.

Falcon sought to reassure him.

"You misjudge me, Cuffee," he said, finally. "I am a friend of your dead master. I know all about his treasure and where it is hidden. I seek it for his children."

The darky's face brightened.

"Ah! de little chillen—Missee Eunice and Myrtie; like two peas in a pod he left at Savannah. Yes, yes. Ye tell no lie; ye know too much. Cuffee believe ye—but whar am de proofs?"

"What proofs?"

"De little locket wid Massa Winthrop's wife's picture. He say when he go: 'Cuffee, if de Spaniards kill me, nebber give up de ole iron box until a friend bring dis locket.' Whar dat locket he den show me? Ye got it?"

Falcon did not reply. He saw that it was impossible to move the old darky's faithfulness to every instruction of his master. Some trinket had been the gage of confidence between those two in their last meeting, and the detective felt he could not influence this stubborn negro amid his ignorance and unwavering fidelity to a beloved employer's interests.

He could waste no time. Already Rodney Wayne and his accomplices might be on the trail.

"Wait a moment, Cuffee, and I will explain," he began.

The sentence was not concluded. A sudden and unexpected episode caused the darky to start back from the table and in so doing turn over the candle, extinguishing it, and plunging the apartment in darkness.

Crash! bang!

A shot from without smashed the window and whizzed within an inch of Falcon's head. The detective uttered an ejaculation of concern and dismay.

An enemy was already on the trail. On the very field of action where Elwyn Winthrop's treasure was hidden—the battle between law and villainy had commenced.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HIDDEN JEWELS.

WHEN the shot was fired, Falcon at once decided that Rodney Wayne or some of his villainous associates were at the bottom of it, and he commingled prudence with rapidity of movement.

With a quick warning to old Cuffee against the persons Falcon knew would try to influence him, the detective groped his way to the door, suddenly burst it open, and dodging this way and that, reached some dense foliage lining the edge of the morass.

His flight had been evidently unperceived by the person who fired the shot through the window, which was located at the rear of the cabin, but Falcon, as he looked, saw several stealthy forms come around to the front of the house.

"Hy, dar! What fo' you make dis racket, yo' thieves, yo' tramps? Take dat!"

Old Cuffee, at the door, aimed his musket at the strangers just come into view.

"Down him, or we'll have trouble with the old crank!" ordered a voice unmistakably that of Rodney Wayne.

There was a slight conflict, and Falcon, his blood boiling, saw the old negro sink over the threshold of his home with a groan.

Then the party of new arrivals passed directly by him, and paused so near that he could hear every word that was spoken.

"Here is the place, Talbot," fell on Falcon's hearing in Wayne's tones. "Smith is watching the house for that infernal diver detective. He must be in the cabin or vicinity, but he is alone, and we can pop him over if he appears. You see I did well in hurrying to land, and coming here at once."

"Maybe he's got the treasure-box already," suggested Talbot, anxiously.

Wayne laughed incredulously, and pointed at the surface of the swamp.

"Not through that nest of alligators," he said. "It's going to be no fool's play, I tell you, Talbot. See, yonder must be the old tree-stump described in the paper left by Elwyn Winthrop, and the darky here, as our negro guide told us, is undoubtedly the former servant of Winthrop."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"Begin operations, and secure that treasure before morning," was the reply. "Hail Florine and the guide."

Talbot uttered a shrill whistle. A mcmen later, La Belle Florine, still veiled as alway, since the voyage began, came to the spot, followed by a tall, lithe negro.

"You see, my friend," spoke Wayne to the latter, "we've silenced the old darky you were so afraid of. Now, then, I paid you pretty well to bring us here, didn't I?"

"Powerful well, marse, suah," grinned the African.

"I'll give you ten times as much to help me still further."

"What is it, sah?"

"You see that swamp there?"

"De Morass Swamp—'Gator Run?—yes, sah."

"And that stump in the middle?"

"Live-oak stump—yes, sah."

"I want you to get to that stump now, right off, by swimming, or boat, or some way."

The wild terror manifested by the darky at Wayne's last words indicated that the plotters did certainly need an expert to perform the journey necessary to secure Elwyn Winthrop's hidden treasure.

"At night, among does 'gators? No, no, marse! Ef it was daytime—but no, de daytime de ole niggah yonder is on guard."

"You are afraid of the alligators then?"

"Snap Sambo in two jerks, sah, an' as to a boat dar ain't a gum-tree or flat in de swamp. Ole niggah yonder drive 'em away—his swamp, he says. Mou't try a log in de daytime, but 'gator fierce and hungry in de night."

Rodney Wayne's brow darkened, and there was a depressing pause. Then he said irritably:

"Then you can't risk reaching that trunk yonder for a hundred dollars?"

The darky started.

"How much, marse, do ye say?"

Wayne repeated his offer.

"Gorra! marse, I try it. Tell yer what I do. Down de swamp live brack doctor hoodoo; I go to him and buy sleep liquor, whole pile of it. Dat fix 'gators, suah. Be back in an hour."

Wayne evidently saw a way to finally accomplish his object by humoring the negro's superstitious whims, and bade him hasten his return. The man disappeared and Wayne turned to Talbot:

"We must reach that stump if we have to swim for it ourselves," he said. "I don't see that those reptiles look very fierce."

He carelessly flung a stone into the water as he spoke. He started back as a dozen expanded jaws snapped at it, and the swamp seemed suddenly alive with moving objects.

"Go and help Smith corner or follow that infernal Falcon," said Wayne to Talbot. "The moon is going down and we are meeting with disappointment all around. Maybe the shot through the window killed him."

Talbot moved toward the cabin, and Falcon,

as Wayne and Florine engaged in a desultory conversation, glided through the foliage concealing him, and reached the other side of the swamp. He made one effort under cover of the darkness to swim the distance to the old stump, but he retreated precipitately, and was forced to use his knife deftly on several small alligators which disputed his right to invade their territory, and he determined to await developments with the return of the negro Wayne had employed to aid him in his design upon Elwyn Winthrop's treasure-box.

He managed to get concealed in the near vicinity of the conspirators, when the darky did finally put in an appearance. He was loaded down with a parcel and a pail filled with some dark liquid, and he chuckled confidently as the others followed him to the edge of the swamp.

"No danger, we fix de 'gators dis time," he said. "Old hoodoo doctor gib me secret. Suah de niggah in de cabin not interrupt us?"

"Oh, he's settled," replied Talbot carelessly. "It's for the old fox, Falcon, we must keep our eyes open. I say, Wayne, I believe he's piped our game, and hurried after official help."

"Then let us hurry. Come, Sambo, begin."

The center of the interested cynosure of the others, the negro commenced operations. He took a dipper and ladled out the contents of the pail, flinging it toward the tree stump. It seemed to be the extract of some bitter root, exceedingly distasteful to the alligators, for they crawled out of the radius of the liquid huddling together nearer the shore.

"Dat stuff fix 'em!" cried the negro jubilantly. "It make 'em sick an' sleepy, and Sambo play 'possum an' swim whar he throw de liquor. Now den, marse, you take dis passel. See, dar's a big jewsharp. Go down de shore a little way, twang de harp, and fling dose pieces of bread dar into de water. 'Gators follow, suah, an' Sambo go to de stump. What for, marse?—yer nebber tole me what for!"

"For an iron box you will find inside of it."

"Oho! Sambo understand. Now go 'way, folks, an' we see what we will see."

Wayne and his companions did as ordered. The negro half-stripped and began to enter the water. Then after cautiously wading out several feet, he swam gently through the course from which the alligators had withdrawn.

Falcon had seen and overheard all that had transpired. One minute after Sambo had entered the water he followed him. As the negro reached the old stump, and clambered up its side, the detective well-concealed by the darkness grasped his throat.

Holding a knife close to the glaring frightened eyes of the negro, he whispered fiercely into his ear:

"You move, and I'll kill you! Keep quiet, I tell you, or you don't get your money."

Sambo's thick skull could not readily comprehend the situation. He clung to the side of the stump, looking vacantly up at Falcon, who began feeling around in the middle of the tree. The detective lifted a large stone obstructing his operations, and beneath it felt an even, hard surface. A minute later he grasped it, a small, but heavy iron box.

"The treasure of Elwyn Winthrop!" he muttered with a thrill of delight.

At that moment from the near shore Wayne's voice spoke:

"Maybe he can't see in the dark, Talbot. Flash the lantern!"

Fatal movement! The bright radiance of a reflector mask lantern illuminated the stump. A loud yell from those on shore announced that the plotters had recognized Falcon.

He leaped into the water, the box in one hand, unheeding the alarmed and mystified Sambo. He struck at the distended jaws of a venturesome alligator that came near him, but finally clambered ashore, his treasure safe.

"Back, Falcon, or I will fire!"

La Belle Florine extended a gleaming revolver, checking the detective's flight. He turned and darted down the shore, and then, just as escape seemed within his grasp, and the bullets of his enemies sped wide of their intended mark, he uttered a cry of dismay.

For old Cuffee, recovered from his insensibility, blocked his path. The ancient army musket extended, dire vengeance in his eye, he shouted:

"Ye thieves, ye tramps, ye rob de dead. Take dat!"

Falcon reeled. A thousand keen pains seemed to paralyze energy and life. The box fell clattering to the ground, and as he dimly saw La Belle Florine seize it with a triumphant cry, he reeled where he stood, a victim to the mistaken fidelity of old Cuffee, who had fired point blank at his unprotected form.

For the first time in his eventful career, at the very hour of success, with half a hundred shots piercing breast and arms, the brave old detective sunk insensible to the ground.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SHADOWING.

WHEN Falcon the detective again opened his eyes the stars told him that several hours had elapsed since he last saw their light.

Utter silence and loneliness brooded over the

desolate scene around him, and as he arose painfully to his feet, he found that his arms and breast were bleeding from numerous shot wounds. A glance within the cabin showed no occupant, and as with a groan of dismay Falcon realized that La Belle Florine had succeeded in spiriting away the treasure, he aroused all his courage and started along the boggy path leading toward the sea.

By some good fortune, he stumbled over a hut at the edge of the Morass which happened to be the habitation of the very hoodoo doctor Sambo had described, and most favorable to Falcon's plans he found Sambo himself there. The hoodoo impostor was no mean surgeon, and he picked out the shot from Falcon's body, applied a soothing lotion, and supplied with the information from Sambo that Wayne and his party had taken a certain road to the Chicopee river, the detective started on their trail.

He learned that a little beyond the doctor's cabin, they had secured a horse and wagon, and he trailed this until, about two miles from the river, he drew aside from the road and ensconced himself behind a tree as he heard distinctly the sounds of human voices ahead.

Cautiously edging his way around a bend in the highway, the detective saw the objects of his quest. Seated in a high-box wagon, were Wayne, Florine, Talbot and Smith. They had come to a halt, and two men whom Falcon recognized as members of the crew on board the yacht, were conversing with them.

"You see that glare in the sky?" cried one of them, pointing to a lurid radiance in the eastern heavens. "That's the yacht. The captain sent us to intercept you, for there's danger."

"Danger!" ejaculated Wayne in alarm.

"Yes. Two hours after you left one of the crew on land spotted the sheriff from the next town of Tallapasa with half a dozen constables. They came to overhaul the ship as a smuggling craft and to arrest you and your friends."

"And then?" demanded Wayne in a tone betraying the profoundest alarm and amazement.

"The captain couldn't afford to have our smuggling apparatus overhauled, and as Fuertado has the ship insured, why, she took fire."

"What does this mean?" broke in Florine, excitedly. "Can it be that Falcon put the police on our trail?"

"No, miss," vouchsafed one of the sailors, "the man who brought down the police on us was the man you sunk in the sea, the pretended embezzler from Fuertado, for I saw him with the sheriff."

"Spotted, surrounded, as sure as fate!" burst forth Bruce Talbot, impetuously. "Come, Wayne, there's no time to trifle. If Ellis Searle is alive, and on our trail, he will throw a cordon of police around us before the night is through."

"What do you suggest?" inquired Wayne, anxiously.

"Separate."

"We can't separate and grope around blindly in this cursed country we know nothing of. Let us make for the first big town, divide, and light out."

Wayne turned his horse's head, and started the animal at a rapid rate down the road he had come, the sailors disappearing in the brush.

"I can't afford to lose sight of these people," muttered Falcon, as the vehicle passed him, and he managed to catch at the hind axle, and finally lift himself over the box.

The rear of the wagon was piled four feet high with flags, evidently some load intended for morning market by the man they had secured the rig from. Ensconced under these, and patiently awaiting developments, Falcon inwardly chuckled over the prompt action of Ellis Searle.

He peered forth from his snug covert as the wagon finally stopped. He could see the lights of a town a little ahead, and he heard Wayne direct Smith to go toward it and reconnoiter.

When Smith returned after the lapse of an hour, there was a low but animated conversation which did not entirely reach Falcon's ears. He heard Smith mention the words "old friends," "circus," and then Florine said:

"Then it is agreed we separate until late tonight to meet as directed."

"Yes," responded Wayne. "We cannot venture to show ourselves in daylight, if Searle is on our trail and the police have been notified. We have too much at stake."

Falcon moved uneasily. He saw Florine start away from the wagon alone, and heard her confederates discuss their plans of concealment until they learned how far they dare venture and how easily Smith could arrange for railroad transportation to the north.

"I must not let La Belle Florine get out of my sight. If she has the box with her, an arrest at once will save further complications and trouble," soliquized Falcon.

He was gratified to be able to glide from the wagon to the road unperceived. Florine was some distance ahead of him and nearing the town. Beyond her, on an immense pasture field, several large white tents loomed up, somewhat puzzling the detective.

Suddenly the woman turned. She uttered a little cry of alarm as she caught sight of her pursuer, and then broke into a dead run. As they came nearer toward the tents, Falcon discerned

that they comprised the canvas of some traveling circus. The woman reached their vicinity first, glided out of view, lost amid the snowy reach of cloth, and, when Falcon gained the space between the two tents, where he had last seen her, there was no trace of her.

He paused, keenly disappointed, the more so, because he had observed that she did not carry the coveted iron box, and he almost regretted that he had left the wagon. But he kept walking around the tent, and stopped abruptly as he heard behind a canvas the sound of Florine's voice.

She was breathless and excited, and was conversing with some member of her own sex.

"You don't know me," she was saying—"La Belle Florine, the tiger-tamer! No, no, I can't lift my veil, for I have met with an accident, that has disfigured my face for life. Zuleika, I am in a bad box. You must hide me and give me shelter until late to-night."

"But you may be traced here."

"Then let me at once disguise myself as one of the performers. You shall have a liberal reward for your trouble. For old times' sake, Zuleika, when you and I were queens of the arena!"

The woman she addressed by the fanciful name of Zuleika seemed to assent to her proposition. With a satisfied smile, Falcon walked from the spot.

"Good!" he muttered. "La Belle Florine is located until nightfall. I am safe to take a little rest until then, but when she goes to meet Rodney Wayne to-night to divide the treasure, by hook or crook, I, Falcon, must be with her."

Through all that day La Belle Florine rested securely in the companionship of her old associate, Zuleika, and Wayne and his accomplices skulked in covert, in some portion of the surrounding country unknown to Falcon.

All that day, too, Ellis Searle who had indeed escaped the smuggling balloon as Falcon had theorized and had reached the yacht, and then the town to put the police on the trail of Wayne and his fellow conspirators, ransacked the vicinity for some trace of the plotters.

And Falcon placidly slumbered, until nightfall, and then in a new disguise haunted the neighborhood of the circus, satisfied himself that La Belle Florine was still there, and watching a favorable opportunity, parted the canvas of one of the dressing-rooms and entered it, little dreaming that the action involved the initial step in one of the most thrilling exploits of his life.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A TERRIFIC COMBAT.

THE dressing-room to which Falcon had penetrated was a small, six-by-six space, partitioned by canvas. Beyond, he could see various members of the company awaiting their turns to perform, and could hear the music of the circus orchestra in the main tent.

The room appeared to be a sort of storeroom for the time being, for all kinds of fanciful costumes were lying around the place.

Falcon had a definite object in view—to keep near La Belle Florine, and if possible to gain her confidence; and he acted boldly. Donning a fanciful ring attire, he placed a wig on his head, touched up his face with some rouge, and seizing an iron wand or cane, that seemed to go with the dress, stepped out into the main dressing tent.

The place held fully fifty people, and he mingled among them without exciting any extraordinary comment. There were a dozen or more acrobats awaiting their turn to perform, and Falcon, keeping his eye out for Florine, made up his mind to join in their sports if necessary, trusting to a year of circus experience in his young days to carry him successfully through.

He soon learned why he had not been observed as an interloper. It seemed that a traveling branch of the company had stranded in a neighboring county, and its members had slowly come in to join the main enterprise.

He was standing watching the female performers, and trying to locate Florine, when a woman who had just completed a bare-back-horse act came toward him.

Following her was a woman gorgeously arrayed in tinsel and tarlatan. Her rouged face was a thorough piece of enamel, and she wore a gauze mask.

"Florine," murmured Falcon, concernedly; "and the woman is leading her here. What is coming, I wonder?"

The foremost of the two, whom Falcon soon learned was Zuleika, addressed him in a rapid, off-hand manner, glancing at his attire and wand.

"You are the cage man from the other show, of course," she said. "It's lucky you've come in time for with another unexpected accession—my friend here, the masked tiger-tamer, we can get up a fine act. The ring-master will post you. Hello! Florine, there's the bell for your act now."

So voluble was the woman, so impetuous the movement that carried both Florine and Falcon toward the curtains, that neither of the latter spoke a word. In a flash Falcon discerned that Florine, to repay her friend for her kindness, was consenting to perform, and also that by

some error, he, mistaken for another, was to be pressed into service.

The desperation of boldness and the love of adventure urged this wonderful expert at all athletic sports, forward, but a mist seemed to obscure his vision for the next few moments. He was conscious of reaching the curtains leading to the ring, side by side with Florine, he heard a bell ring, saw the curtains rolled aside, the band strike up, and catching his cue from the experienced Florine, as she clasped his hand with true arenic grace, he was impelled forward on the conventional glide into the saw-dust ring.

He heard the thunders of applause as Florine courtesied low to the delighted audience. Then he saw her spring up the steps of a gilded cage containing two crouching tigers. The ring-master bent his lips to his ear, and pressed a handkerchief into his hand.

"Yonder is your cage," he whispered, indicating a second cage in the ring containing three lions. "The brutes are nearly dead with age, but the female is somewhat cranky. Try the chloroform if she gets wicked, and use the dagger if she tries to tear you."

The heart of the detective failed him momentarily. Only that a retreat might arouse La Belle Florine's suspicions, did he summon all his courage to his rescue.

"I'm in for it, here goes!" he muttered grimly, and he shut his teeth tightly, sprung up the iron steps, opened the door, slammed it shut after him, and confronted the lions with unflinching nerve.

The ring-master had spoken the truth. Two of the lions when he called them up went mechanically through the customary springs and maneuvers. The third, crouching sullenly in one corner of the cage, resented his presence with an ugly growl, and then looking up and catching sight of a stranger, began to arise slowly to its haunches with savage eyes and bristling mane.

Florine, an expert in her line, went through her performance with the placidity of experience, but Falcon knew he had only his eye and a few brief past exploits in the circus line to guide him. He expected trouble with the beast before him, and he knew that the influence of his fixed gaze was broken, as the lion, with a terrific growl, sprung bodily toward him.

He thrust the handkerchief across its nostrils. The lion tore it from his grasp, and struck at him with its paw, and then a great cry of horror went up from the audience as Falcon slipped and lay at the bottom of the cage, apparently at the mercy of the furious brute.

This was no trick-play—they realized that as the ring-master turned pale. In that moment of supreme peril, with the lion's hot breath fanning his cheek, Falcon forgot his surroundings. He described a single nimble movement, evading the descending paws of the immense brute, and then, as its jaws swept his arm, he drew his dagger.

The next minute it was a fight for life. The hideous roars of the lion, the sympathetic cries of its less dangerous mates, and the shrieks of fainting women in the audience, made the scene impressive. They saw the performer deluged in blood, saw his dagger gleam a dozen times in the air, saw the wounded lion spring viciously at the bars, as he deftly opened and slammed to the door of the cage, and then a yell of delight and approval greeted him as he fell half-fainting into the arms of the master-of-ceremonies.

He was the center of an admiring group, as, returned from the dressing-room in the disguise he had assumed, he mixed again with the performers. He listened silently to their praises, shuddering at his last fearful peril, but every detective instinct aroused to keen professional zest as a veiled form came toward him.

It was Florine. Her eyes glittered from behind her veil as she addressed him.

"You beat them all," she said. "I never saw more nerve."

Falcon bowed with becoming humility.

"Are you acquainted here in the town?" inquired Florine, her voice sinking to a confidential whisper.

"Why?"

"Because I need a little direction and advice, and your bravery attracts me to you. I have an engagement with some friends in half an hour, but only know the place—a deserted factory—by description. If you would help me find the building—"

Falcon thrilled to delight at her persuasive tones. How deftly had he worked his plans, how surely was La Belle Florine falling into the net!

"If I can be of any service to you command me," he said, courteously.

There was a strange glitter in the eyes behind the filmy veil.

"Then come outside," spoke Florine. "Good-by, Zuleika. I will not forget you," she whispered to her friend.

Falcon saw Florine glance stealthily, cautiously around, once outside of the tent.

"The place I want to find is a ruined factory, half a mile west of the town, on what is known as College turnpike."

"I will find it for you," said Falcon, as they

started off, Florine's gloved hand resting lightly on his arm.

"She is leading me to her confederates, to her treasure, never suspecting my identity," soliloquized Falcon, triumphantly. "This time I will corner the game or die!"

He made a few inquiries from pedestrians, and at last they reached an old dilapidated structure on the outskirts of the town. A form sprung from its doorway as they approached. It was Talbot.

"Florine?" he spoke cautiously.

"Yes," replied the woman.

"And this man with you?"

"Is a friend. Don't fear for him. Come, sir, will you accompany me to my friends?"

"Certainly," assented Falcon, feeling safe in his disguise.

Smith led them up a stairway and ushered them into a room. On a table was a lamp, and by its side a rusted iron box. Rodney Wayne turned quickly as Florine entered the apartment.

"Ah, at last!" he cried. "We were getting impatient, but there is a stranger here—"

"Oh he is a friend of mine," replied Florine coolly, "he calls himself Hercules, the king of athletics, but I call him—Falcon!"

Like a thunderbolt, the word fell on the unsuspecting detective's ear. Outwitted by a keen shrewd schemer, who had deftly pierced his disguise, he felt her seize his arms suddenly, saw her allies spring forward, and was borne to the floor, his struggles unheeded, a captive in the hour of seeming triumph!

CHAPTER XXV.

A STARTLING REVELATION.

FALCON was bound securely before he could recover from his surprise and flung roughly into a corner of the room, Talbot scowling murderously upon him.

"Where did you find him?" demanded Wayne with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"At the circus. If you let him go this time, you deserve to be downed. A man who will fight lions for the sake of justice is a dangerous enemy."

"Did he do that?"

"Yes," and Florine related the incident of Falcon's imposition at the circus, concluding with the words:

"I never suspected him until he tackled the lion. When I saw him dive away from the brute I knew he was no professional, and lured him on. I've delivered the goods; you dispose of them. Now for the box of treasure."

She moved toward the table, and her hands caressed the rusted iron casket covetously.

Wayne took up a chisel and hammer.

"We have not opened it, you see," he said. "We wanted no trouble afterward, and you cannot say we have defrauded you."

"That box contains our fortunes," breathed Florine, fervently. "Once divided, remember your promise—you will make me your wife!"

Wayne frowned annoyedly, and began prying at the lid of the box. Talbot, at a word from him, proceeded to the window and stood watching for any surprise, while Florine divided her attention between the box and the prostrate Falcon.

There was a sharp click finally, then a harsh, creaking sound, and with trembling, eager fingers Rodney Wayne tore the cover open.

"At last!" he muttered, in an intense tone.

"Duped! Great Heaven! Robbed! The box—" cried Florine, suddenly.

"Contains no treasure. Ten thousand demons! we have been led on a fool's chase."

He had fallen back from the table, the color of marble, his eyes staring straight at the uncovered box in unutterable amazement and dismay.

Florine, quicker witted than her companions, seized the situation more coherently, and began examining the box.

"It is filled with a coarse, black powder and rocks," she said, "and here is a wire broken off in pulling it from the stump."

"And a concussion-cap attached. I see it all!" cried Wayne. "That negro feared an attempt on the treasure and removed it, replacing it with this infernal-machine connected with his cabin. He has the treasure. Come, Talbot; there is no time to lose. Back to the swamp!"

"But first this man," hissed Florine, fixing a malignant glance on Falcon.

Wayne moved to a corner of the apartment, where a large iron barrel stood.

"Throw him in there," he said shortly to Florine, as he lifted the detective.

The helpless Falcon chuckled serenely at their discomfiture, but experienced a despairing emotion as he heard them fasten down the iron cover of the barrel.

"Now, then," he heard Wayne say, "that box is filled with powder and missiles. Attach a fuse, Talbot, and we shall have no more trouble with Falcon."

Talbot moved to obey his confederate. The latter started suddenly.

"Ha! what is that?"

"It is Smith," explained Talbot, as a man burst suddenly into the room.

"You want to light c spoke Smith, breathlessly."

"Why, what's up?"

"The police. I saw five of them at the bend in the road."

"Come, Florine; come, Talbot," spoke Wayne hurriedly, "the fuse will ignite the powder in ten minutes. Now for the negro's cabin and the treasure."

"What negro?" demanded Smith, with a peculiar intonation of voice.

"The one who shot Falcon."

"You are too late!"

"What mean you?"

"That, while lurking around the depot an hour since, I saw him in a coach bound northward—"

"Who?" interrupted Florine suspiciously.

"The negro, Cuffee."

Falcon started as a theory of the negro's outwitting his foes suggested itself to his mind.

He even forgot his own peril. Bound in an iron tank, with a spluttering fuse burning its way momentarily toward the black grains of powder, as he heard Smith say as the quartette hastened from the room.

"And Cuffee was not alone."

"Not alone!" repeated Wayne, vaguely divining some new and disastrous announcement.

"No, he had a companion, a young girl, and he carried a carpet-bag, so heavy that it almost overweighed him."

"The treasure!" cried Wayne and Talbot, tumultuously.

"But the girl!" interrupted Florine, wildly—"you know her?"

"Yes; I had seen her before."

"Her name?"

And upon the amazed hearing of the plotters and detective fell the impressive reply, announcing a new mystery in the case in hand:

"Myrtle Winthrop!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

A TIMELY RESCUE.

FALCON gave himself up for lost as he heard the plotters disappear after Smith's last remarkable disclosure concerning the old negro Cuffee and Myrtle Winthrop.

If what he said was true, the fact to Falcon's mind constituted a new complication most unfavorable to the conspirators, for the shrewd old ducky had in all probability not only fled with the treasure, but in some mysterious way stumbling across Myrtle Winthrop, had come to an understanding with her.

There was silence in the apartment now, except for a low, ominous hiss. The helpless detective began to count the moments between himself and eternity. When the box of powder exploded and fired the building, his situation would be one of awful peril and horror.

Suddenly from some distant part, loud cries and the echoes of pistol-shots mingled with the heavy tramping of feet coming nearer and nearer.

Falcon could tell that the door of the room was burst open, and a familiar voice shouted excitedly:

"Ha! what is this? A burning fuse! Those demons sought to destroy the building."

"Ellis Searle, quick! Unfasten the cover—here!"

Falcon shouted the words, and a moment later the iron lid of the barrel was removed. He was dragged forth by the delighted Searle and released from his bonds.

"Wayne and his friends?" was his first query.

"The police are after them. We were watching on the outside, and as they came down I heard them talking of you. They were too quick for us, and slipped down a dark passageway, but the officers are in hot pursuit."

For the next half-hour the vicinity of the old factory was the scene of excited activity, but the result of a careful search for Wayne and his emissaries proved signally successful.

They had escaped by way of some low sheds to a river, and, when this fact was discovered, had such a start of their pursuers that the police practically abandoned the quest, sending only two officers on the broken trail.

"We shall find these people when we want them," remarked Falcon to Ellis Searle. "For the present more important affairs demand our attention. Wayne and his friends have come forth bootless in their mission, but they will not abandon the game."

"Explain," murmured the mystified Searle.

"They will try to find the person we must at once trace down."

"You mean—"

"Your wife Myrtle."

An excited, suspenseful cry surged to the lips of Ellis Searle.

"Then she does live?—you know where she is?"

"I think I can locate her, but, first, let us exchange notes, and then with a mutual understanding of the case, we can act more coherently."

Falcon proceeded to relate his adventures since Searle had last met him exactly as the reader knows them, while Searle told how he had escaped from the balloon and managed to

induce the police to seek to arrest Wayne and his accomplices.

"Your belief that this negro you call Cuffee and my wife have met, and, with the treasure deftly removed from its original casket by the former, have fled from their enemies, explains a mystery I could not solve," remarked Searle.

Falcon looked curious.

"I visited that old hut at the swamp, and I found a note there which awoke all my hopes, but mystified and confused me."

"A note from whom?"

"In my wife's handwriting."

"Impossible!" ejaculated Falcon.

"Read for yourself."

He handed the detective a penciled note as he spoke, which Falcon devoured with interested gaze.

"A persecuted, friendless girl, who does not know friend from foe," it ran, "escaped from perils of villainy and the deep, wandered to this cabin late last night and fainted at its door."

"An old negro named Cuffee found her, and found, too, a locket on her neck placed there years before by her father, and recognized it."

"When this negro began to question her and talk himself she found a key to a great mystery, for he recognized the locket as the property of his dead master, Elwyn Winthrop, whose daughter this girl is."

"Then he urged her to fly, for he held a treasure that villains might wrest from him, and she now goes to New York with him to devote if necessary all her fortune, so strangely found, to bringing to justice the inhuman beings who murdered her husband, Ellis Searle, at sea."

"Why she writes this is because in Cuffee's narrative she traces in the appearance of one man at the cabin, a friend, a detective, whom she has recognized from what she has heard her enemies tell. If this note does fall into his hands he will know that Myrtle Winthrop, the truth of her enemies' motives known to her at last, will at once proceed to the chief of police in New York city to endeavor to avenge her husband's murder and her own wrongs on the assassin, Rodney Wayne and his accomplices."

It was the strangest missive Falcon had ever read, but it opened his eyes to the true situation in a flash. His conversation with Searle had taken place at the hotel after leaving the structure where he had just been released.

"Come," he said. "This affair is plain to me. Cuffee found Myrtle, and the locket supplied the missing link to my claims. He realizes her danger, and has gone North with her. Doubtlessly, they fear Wayne sufficiently to use extreme caution, and may travel in a roundabout way. If we do not trace them, Wayne surely cannot, and we will hope to find Myrtle Winthrop at New York city."

At midnight the two friends left the town on a train northward bound. They had found no trace of Wayne or his accomplices, but they left instructions with the authorities to telegraph in all directions for their apprehension, Falcon assuring them of a reward, and vouching for it that their crimes warranted the trouble.

They were certain that the express-train preceding their own contained Myrtle and Cuffee, but as Falcon suggested the fugitives might leave it and cross the country to throw Wayne off their trail, they did not telegraph ahead, but bided patiently their time until New York city was reached.

A night of inquiry and investigation failed to reveal whether Myrtle and her sable attendant had preceded them, but toward evening of the next day, they struck a clew.

Falcon, who had been off on a private search, returned to the hotel, where he had left Searle, about dusk.

"I have located our people," he said.

"You mean Myrtle?" asked Searle, eagerly.

"No, but the man who knows where Myrtle Winthrop is, the man who, despite his past failures, is still on the trail of the Winthrop fortune—Rodney Wayne!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

DEFEAT.

THE detective hurried Searle to a portion of the city near the Bowery, where a dozen or more low drinking saloons were located, and came to a halt opposite one of them.

"By the merest chance," he explained, "I located Smith and Wayne in yonder den. Talbot, disguised, is working on the outside."

"And you learned something concerning Myrtle?" asked Searle, anxiously.

"Yes; these men have located her and Cuffee. But we can only learn their whereabouts by shadowing Wayne, who has been keener than ourselves in this instance."

About an hour after stationing themselves opposite the saloon, two men, closely muffled, came out on the street, cast cautious glances up and down, and then separated.

"Wayne and Smith," whispered Falcon.

"They separate to meet again, and I am satisfied that will be in the neighborhood of your wife's present place of abode."

"What shall I do?" inquired Searle.

"Follow Smith closely, while I take after Wayne. Be cautious and patient."

Falcon himself glided from the doorway that had concealed them, and took up the trail of his man. Wayne's frequent glances behind him showed that he was keenly suspicious, and oc-

casioned the detective no little deftness in evading his glance.

Finally Wayne slackened his gait. He had come to an illy-lighted street, upon which was located the rear of a large gloomy brick building. He stopped abruptly as Falcon drew back in the shadow, uttered a peculiar signal, and disappeared through a door set in a deep embrasure in the edifice.

Falcon stood debating with himself for some time as to his best course. Then he followed in Wayne's footsteps and reached the door through which the latter had disappeared.

He turned the knob, the door was locked. As expert at lock-picking as a professional thief, Falcon manipulated the door, thrust it open, and advanced on tip-toe down the corridor, dimly lighted.

He drew back in some dismay as he heard a sound behind him. He turned in time to recognize the crouching form of Talbot. The latter held a peculiar object like a black leather bag in his hand. Before Falcon could draw a weapon, Talbot reached toward him with the bag which caught over his head. The detective was pushed forward and fell down a series of stone steps, and almost choked, and blinded, and stunned, heard a heavy door clang to, evidently shutting him a helpless captive in some strange underground prison.

In his own dire extremity, Falcon had no time to think of the friend he had sent on the trail of Smith, yet Ellis Searle had met with an accident most disastrous to all the detective's plans.

Less expert as a man-hunter than his patron and friend, Searle had aroused Smith's suspicions, and just as at the front they reached the self-same building Wayne had led Falcon to, and just as the eager Searle saw a form resembling that of Cuffee disappearing within the edifice, Smith suddenly turned.

He had verified his suspicions as they passed a lamp-post, and recognized despite his disguise the husband of Myrtle Winthrop. Smith dealt Searle a stunning and unexpected blow and drove him to the pavement.

Only for an instant was Ellis Searle downed. Springing to his feet, he drew a revolver, and as Smith sought to take advantage of his temporary defeat by flight an ominous click sounded on the air.

"Halt! or I will fire," came imperatively from Searle's lips.

The desperado paused under the menace of the leveled revolver. A stern resolution, now that he was discovered, came into Searle's face.

"March down that street," he ordered as he caught sight of a flashing lamp in the near distance, "till I tell you to stop. Disobey me, or make a treacherous movement, and I swear I will kill you!"

Smith, with a sullen face, started forward:

"That light yonder is a police station. I shall give you into custody when we reach there," came threateningly from Searle's lips.

Smith marched up the steps of the station when they reached it. Ellis Searle confident of securing his man, now that he was under the very shadow of the law, lowered his weapon to his side to push open the door before him and usher in his prisoner.

It was a fatal movement for his designs. Quick as a flash the keen-witted Smith tore the weapon from his hand. Giving Searle a terrific push through the door, he followed him shouting to the startled officers in the room:

"Secure that man! I have had to drive him hither at the point of this revolver. He is Ellis Searle, wanted for the murder of Anson Drexel!"

For a moment Ellis Searle was too overcome to speak. When he finally poured forth his excited explanation, the crafty Smith, who had whispered to the captain that he was on the trail of others in the case, had disappeared.

Meantime, Falcon, amid his new defeat, had managed to tear the choking bag from his head. Talbot had shut him into what seemed a coal vault, the door of which heavily bolted on the outside resisted his every effort at escape.

The undaunted detective was not long, however, in finding a way out of his dilemma. He forced a little barred window, crept up a narrow winding staircase, and finally came to its end at a window looking out on a dilapidated balcony and the street below.

The sound of a human voice thrilling him strangely, caused the detective to lean from the window and listen, and then impelled him to creep out on the frail, creaking platform. The next window was open, and from his insecure perch, he could look into the apartment beyond.

Standing near the window, a sachel in one hand, was the woman he had sought, Myrtle Winthrop. She was unnaturally pale, and her eyes were fixed on a man at the other end of the room. It was Rodney Wayne.

"You have hunted me down again," cried the persecuted girl in anguished accents. "Move forward a step, and I will fling this sachel with all its wealth and treasure, which you so covet, out of that window and call for the police."

Falcon was so near the object Myrtle Winthrop held in her hand that he could almost

reach it. He moved forward. Just then a woman's form fairly sprung from some curtained concealment.

With one hand she tore the sachel from the grasp of the shrieking Myrtle, and with the other hand she delivered a quick blow at the detective who had just crept over the window sill.

Then, as she saw Falcon fall backward and go whirling down through space, La Belle Florine sprung through the doorway, and disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HANDS OF JUSTICE.

FOR a moment Rodney Wayne was quite as much startled and horrified as Myrtle Winthrop herself. The rapidity of La Belle Florine's movements and their tragic denouement soon lost their effect, however, except to direct the crafty mind to seize the advantage of the moment.

"The treasure ours, Falcon, for it was he, dashed to pieces on the pavement below!" he muttered, hoarsely. "Good! the girl shall be my charge."

He sprung toward her, as if to gag and secure her as he spoke.

"Help! help!"

Myrtle Winthrop struggled vainly in the powerful grasp of the ruffian bent on silencing her cries, but she looked up hopefully as the door was crashed open, and some new-comer directing a blow at her persecutor, drove him to the floor.

"Lie dar, ye tramp, ye thief!" yelled Cuffee. "Ye's follered us, eh? den ye got 'nuff to last ye dis time. Ha! don't ye dar' ter shoot!"

With a sullen oath Wayne had regained his feet, and drawing a revolver, pointed it squarely at the negro's head.

He did not pull the trigger of the weapon, however, for a second intruder diverted his attention, and amid his surprise Rodney Wayne allowed the revolver to drop from his hand to the floor.

Myrtle Winthrop uttered a wild cry of delight, for the hall doorway framed the beloved form of Ellis Searle. As Wayne regained his wonted boldness after the first shock of surprise and sought to intercept the girl, the negro secured his revolver and held him at bay.

"Myrtle, my darling, my wife!" cried Searle in impassioned accents. "Do not shrink nor tremble at the sight of this man. His long career of fraud and crime is ended."

"Indeed!" sneered Wayne lurid with rage, held back from violently assaulting Searle only by the menace of the pistol in Cuffee's hand.

"Ay! Rodney Wayne," came sternly from Searle's lips. "Your accomplices, Smith and Talbot are now below in the hands of the police, this house is surrounded, and you cannot escape."

Wayne turned slightly pale but stood sneering and defiant.

"You will be given an opportunity to confess all, and thereby save yourself," continued Searle.

"Confess what?" interrupted Wayne insolently. "Wait, Myrtle Winthrop, before you fly to the arms of a murderer, for your husband can never disprove the charge of killing his uncle."

"I can and will," came Searle's resolute reply.

"It is false. You spoke of the police. Have a care, or I will call upon them to imprison you a fugitive from justice, and risk all the crime you can lay to my charge."

"You miscalculate the force of your threat," was Searle's calm reply. "I am even now a prisoner, but under parole to a strong guard in yonder hall who believed enough of my story to arrest your accomplices, as they will you."

Rodney Wayne turned ghastly with chagrin. He did not doubt the truth of Searle's statements, and he realized that he was in a bad situation. His game had been blocked, but he essayed a final compromise.

"Listen," he spoke, in a low, guarded tone, "for the punishment of Talbot or Smith I care not. They must take care of themselves, but you dare not arrest me."

"And why?"

"Because if you release me I agree to return an even half of the treasure, now safe in Florine's hands. I agree furthermore to furnish the evidence that will clear you of the crime of murder."

"Ha! you admit my innocence?" cried Searle. "No, Rodney Wayne, I will not connive at your escape. La Belle Florine will be found, and then—"

"You hope to place the killing of your uncle her charge?"

"I do."

"You cannot identify that changed face."

"I shall not suffer, the truth will prevail. Myrtle, come, let the police do their duty, and although a prisoner and an adjudged criminal, believe me, all will come right."

"Hold!"

Rodney Wayne reserved a last strong card to play, and uttered the word imperatively.

"Beware!" he hissed leaning malignantly toward Ellis Searle. "You forget the secret your wife does not know. You forget that I

can cover your uncle Anson Drexel's name with ignominy and crime."

Searle wavered unsteadily, and sought to withdraw Myrtle from the apartment.

"La Belle Florine holds your uncle's confession, and she will make it public. Myrtle Winthrop, stand back from crossing hands with the family of a confessed assassin, for your husband's uncle murdered your father, Elwyn Winthrop!"

"Merciful heavens! it cannot be!"

Myrtle Winthrop uttered the words in startled horror. She read the truth in her husband's face. The episodes of the hour had been too much for her, and with a moan of anguish she sunk insensible to the floor.

Ellis Searle uttered a quick whistle, as he assisted her to a couch. Two officers and a captain of police entered the room.

"There is your other man," spoke Searle, indicating the chagrined and craven Wayne. "As to myself, I have but one favor to ask."

"What is that?" inquired the captain.

"That you allow me to search for the man who can disprove my guilt of my uncle's murder, my friend and associate, Falcon, the detective."

Rodney Wayne uttered a triumphant laugh.

"Look to the pavement below that window for his mangled corpse. You have a frail dependence, Ellis Searle, if you rely on Falcon to save you from the gallows."

But no trace of Falcon was found as indicated and as the police led Wayne, Talbot and Smith to the station, the captain and Searle scoured the edifice for some trace of the detective.

They had reached a desolate room on the ground floor when both paused abruptly. Before them yawned an open void, an unprotected hole, beneath which the sewer surged.

And lying near was a blood-stained knife and a torn hat, which Searle picked up and examined turning pale as he recognized the hat as belonging to his friend, and uttered a groan of dismay and horror.

"I shall never be able to disprove my guilt," he gasped forth. "They have murdered my only witness. He lies there," and he pointed to the sewer. "Falcon, the detective, is dead!"

CHAPTER XXIX. IN THE SEWER.

THE detective, Falcon, whose death Ellis Searle announced in tones so terrified, was indeed the owner of the hat found at the sewer aperture, and the stains upon the reeking knife were his blood.

But Falcon was not dead. When he received that push backward from La Belle Florine, he was taken completely off his guard by the unexpected assault, but he recovered himself promptly, and defeated Florine's murderous intention by a deft movement.

With the agility of a cat he sprang sideways as he found himself descending to the ground, and caught at an iron fire-escape, swung himself downward, opened the window at the first platform, and stood in a hall, silent and listening.

All this was done with marvelous rapidity, so that those above looking out of the window would believe him flung to the ground.

The detective, his attention fixed on sounds from on the next floor, suddenly started as he heard the swish of a dress. Then there was a flare of light, and looking ahead he saw to his delight, almost running toward some stairs, La Belle Florine.

She bore in one hand the sachel torn from Myrtle Winthrop's grasp, in the other a mask lantern. As if bound on reaching some spot quickly, yet fearing to be intercepted, she would flash the lantern ahead to show the way, and then lower it.

Falcon dashed after her.

Against the light in the lower hall, at the very head of the stairs Florine turned. Some one evidently blocked her exit that way. Disdaining caution, as she sought some other avenue of escape, the siren turned down a narrow corridor, keeping the lamp flaring ahead of her.

Step by step, the detective followed her. At last she reached the cellar of the place, and, as she swept the rays of the lantern about her, she discovered Falcon. He had almost reached her side. She had paused at a place where a dark aperture into the earth showed, and it was at its very edge that she now started back, a hissing cry of dismay parting her lips.

The vail she had ordinarily worn she had swept aside since reaching the cellar, the better to see her way, and all the sinister disfigurement of her once beautiful face intensified the venom and chagrin of her startled ejaculation.

"Ha! Falcon, the detective. Then it has come to fight."

The man had thoughts alone for the sachel he believed held the Winthrop treasure. He made a spring forward. At that instant Florine raised the lantern and rashly flung it down the open sewer-hole.

The detective had so nicely calculated his movements, that even in the darkness he had grasped the carpet-bag. But Florine struggling also to retain possession of it, suddenly uttered a harsh vengeful cry, and Falcon reeled where

he stood, as a vicious assault on her part, unexpected and powerful, almost drove him off his balance.

In that struggle in the darkness, rapid and tragic action ensued. Florine had drawn a knife. Bent on killing her enemy, she allowed Falcon to secure the sachel, but transferring her grasp to his throat, began to deal him a dozen quick blows with a knife she had drawn. He tried to dodge the murderous blade, and then as the blood gushed forth from a dozen wounds, he slipped and fell, his hat falling from his head, to furnish to his friend Ellis Searle, together with the blood-stains, the sickening evidence of his violent death at this spot.

A frenzied, piercing shriek thrilled Falcon's hearing as he fell downward. He had slipped over the edge of the sewer aperture. He struck the cold rushing water, and as the shrieks were repeated, he realized that Florine herself shared his fate.

"Help! help! oh, heavens! I am choking—I am dying—help!"

The voice drifted further and further away down the stony conduit, and then fading into a gurgling groan, told the detective that Florine was past his reach. It was all he could do to keep his head above the water. Still grasping the sachel, he caught at the walls, slimy and rounded about him, battled the waters, drifted, or was driven a long distance it seemed, and then, as he appeared to reach a side feeder to the main sewer, he sprang toward it, caught at a projection in the masonry, and clung there momentarily, panting and exhausted.

For over an hour Falcon floundered about in the labyrinthian network of tunnels and drains. He reached a grating at last, broke through its rusted top, and emerged wet and miserable upon a cold, hard floor.

He believed he had traveled at least half a mile from the spot where he had started. In reality he had wound in and out a cross-work of sewers, main and minor, coming out in the basement of one of the lowest thieves' dens in New York city, and within a square of the recent home of Myrtle Winthrop.

He staggered across the floor and, about to push open what seemed to be a door, he paused, dismayed and startled.

For beyond the door against which he leaned Falcon heard human voices, and among them was one he recognized. The tones of Bruce Talbot broke upon his hearing.

"You're old pals, boys," he was saying, "and it's lucky when I broke from the police that I stumbled in here."

"But you'll have to cut for it," suggested a voice.

"Yes, so get the horse ready in the court, and I'll light out before the police trace me down. I'm sharer in half a million, boys, and I won't forget you—What is that?"

"That" was the announcement of a dire accident to Falcon. Intent on listening to Talbot's words, he had leaned too heavily against the door. It fell suddenly open, precipitating him into the very midst of half a dozen murderous-looking villains.

Every man of them sprang up, glaring with alarm and suspicion at the detective, who, gaining his feet, stood pale but resolute, the sachel clasped firmly in one hand.

"Who is he? What does this mean?" demanded one of the men, wildly.

Bruce Talbot's eyes opened to their widest. Springing toward the detective, he yelled triumphantly:

"It means that this is Falcon, the detective, and the half-million I spoke of is in that sachel. Down him! down him!"

CHAPTER XXX.

AT LAST.

FALCON'S hand went out like a shot, striking the approaching Talbot squarely between the eyes and felling him like an ox. Then the detective sprang over his prostrate body, and made for the open door at the end of the room.

Instantly, a dozen shots rattled after his receding form, while Talbot yelled frantically to his friends to stop him.

The detective did not pause, as he reached a dark corridor, but ran its length, and up a narrow stairway, the ruffians in hot pursuit. At the second landing, he paused to take in his situation, but dashed up another flight as more shots echoed up the staircase.

A door blocked the end of the hall. He must either force it, stand his ground, or retrace his steps. He turned the knob, sprang into the room, and as the door clanged after him, heard the triumphant shout:

"Good! he's caged now. Secure the door!"

Falcon heard a chain and bolt rattle outside the room. He was plunged in complete darkness, but drawing his match-case, he flared a lucifer over the scene. There was not a window in the apartment, which was one of the strangest he had ever seen. About twelve feet above, like the top of an observatory, were a line of small clouded glass lights, at the other end of the room a door. He tried it. It was studded with iron and locked.

"I'm in a trap for sure," he muttered grimly,

and getting his revolver ready, he awaited developments.

They were not slow in coming, for as the men seemed to retreat from the hall door, there came a suspicious sound from the one he had attempted to force.

A minute later a ray of light shot into the room from a slide in that door, and a human hand, holding a revolver, began firing point-blank at the detective.

Falcon discerned the game in play to kill him, but he did not despair. He fired at the menacing hand. It was withdrawn with a howl of pain from its owner, and the slide suddenly shut.

Then there was a lapse of silence, and the slide was again opened. A glass object resembling a ball was flung into the room, and Talbot's voice cried:

"That will settle our friend, the detective, for certain!"

The ball fell with a crash to the floor, splintering into a hundred atoms. Immediately a fetid, suffocating odor arose that terrified Falcon, brave-hearted as he was. He fully realized his situation. The ball contained some deadly chemical, which, forming a poisonous gas as it exploded, would soon drive him to death.

Twice in that hermetically-sealed room he fell fainting to the floor. Then he determined to help himself, if possible. He raised his revolver, and fired at the little windows at the top of the apartment. As two of them broke, he felt that the heavy air, finding egress, would lose its destroying power.

He could breathe more freely now, and he waited, weapon in hand, and heard the door unlocked.

Talbot, satisfied that he would find his enemy a corpse, darted into the room.

The next few moments were the most exciting of all Falcon's eventful career.

He downed Talbot with a blow, fought his way through his accomplices in the next room, emptied his revolver into the shrieking mob, and sprang to an open window.

Thirty feet below was a walled-in court. Several men were there, and one was leading a horse across it, evidently the one referred to by Talbot.

The detective did not hesitate at a bold venture. He jumped downward and landed directly on the back of the horse. The startled animal tore itself fairly from the man who led it, and then, despite the shock of his spring, the detective seized the reins and directed the steed to the gateway leading to the lane behind the place.

"Stop him, shut the gate!" raved a voice from the window above.

The horse backed to its haunches as the gate went slamming shut. Falcon brought all his superb horsemanship into play. He drove the horse at lightning speed around the yard, evading the shots fired from the window above, and then, with one tremendous spring, urged the animal over the gate and into the alley beyond.

Ten minutes later he arrived at the nearest police station, the sachel containing the Winthrop fortune safe in his possession, and within the hour, Bruce Talbot, surrounded by the police, was shot dead in the building where he had so nearly killed the detective.

That was a busy night for Falcon. The results of his hard labors was, however, that early the next morning, calm and smiling and properly arrayed he called at the hotel whither Ellis Searle had sent Myrtle Winthrop and old Cuffee the night previous.

Accompanying him was Ellis Searle himself. As the twain entered the presence of the pale and anxious Myrtle, the detective's first words announced joy and hope and happiness to the re-united husband and wife.

"Mrs. Searle," he said to Myrtle, "I bring you your husband, a free man and an innocent one. When you have both had time to realize that at last all your troubles are over. I will show you my proofs that Ellis Searle did not murder Anson Drexel."

"But my poor uncle," murmured Searle, sadly, "and his unfortunate quarrel with Myrtle's father."

"Will also be explained. Mrs. Searle, you need not shrink because you believe your husband's uncle made you fatherless. *Anson Drexel did not kill Elwyn Winthrop!*"

CHAPTER XXXI.

CONCLUSION.

At hearing Falcon's remarkable statement, both Ellis Searle and his wife started joyfully, amazedly.

"What I say is true," continued the detective, complacently. "All the dark and obscured issues in this case have been cleared up. Let me relate what transpired after you, Ellis Searle, were arrested. Then for the sequel."

Briefly, Falcon related what had occurred at the thieves' den including the death of Talbot.

Later on, he related how he had been summoned to the morgue. The body of a woman had been found floating in the river near the mouth of the great central sewer.

It was that of the ill-fated La Belle Florine, and upon her person was found memoranda de-

tailoring all her schemes in conjunction with Rodney Wayne and Bruce Talbot. It told, too, of the inhuman murder of Falcon's friend, the detective, Kepler, and of how the game against Anson Drexel had started through Talbot getting a clew to Elwyn Winthrop's fortune from his murdered wife, poor Eunice Winthrop, the sister of Myrtle.

Armed with this, Falcon had visited Rodney Wayne, in his prison cell, and had frightened him into confessing that it was La Belle Florine who murdered Anson Drexel, and that he and the woman spirited away Ellis Searle the night of the assassination.

Among the papers found on La Belle Florine was one that Falcon learned was the companion document of the written clew to the hidden fortune the dead siren had found on the skeleton of Elwyn Winthrop in the little tin box.

It was a curious document, and for years had lain in that old vault, whither the terrified Anson Drexel had conveyed and secreted the body of the friend he believed he had murdered.

It was hastily penciled, being written by a dying man, and was in the handwriting of Elwyn Winthrop. It seems that when Anson Drexel knocked Wayne down in the library, and fled believing he had killed him, he, Winthrop, had revived. Confused, and thinking he had been assailed and robbed, he drew his revolver; but in staggering to his feet it exploded in his own hand, inflicting a death wound. Then, dying, he realized all, and remembering his quarrel with Drexel, penciled the lines to exonerate his friend, and placed the paper in a tin box. When Anson Drexel returned and found him dead, he believed he had killed him, and never noticed the bullet-hole in his breast, atoning for his error by long years of remorse.

Myrtle Searle wept tears of grief mingled with joy at all this fateful story. The clouded past had been cleared up, and vice had met its due punishment, for in the violent death of Florine and Talbot the assassins of poor Eunice and of Anson Drexel, had paid the penalty of their crimes.

Rodney Wayne committed suicide in prison, and Smith and Fuertado, whom Falcon hunted down, were sent to the penitentiary for long terms of imprisonment.

The loved ones who had suffered death through the evil machinations of Wayne and his accomplices were removed to a beautiful cemetery, even the body of poor Kepler found in the sewer under the house of Villaclaire, who died soon after being found.

The treasure of Elwyn Winthrop amounted to nearly a quarter of a million of dollars, and the reunited husband and wife restored Lawndale to all its former loveliness.

Two friends they have, whom they will never forget. They are old Cuffee, the faithful guardian of Elwyn Winthrop's hidden fortune, and the brave and tireless man, who risked his life to insure them their lasting happiness, and avenge their cruel wrongs—Falcon, the detective!

THE END.

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